Keynote Address
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First, let me thank President John Harmon and his wing woman, Jacqueline Baptiste, for inviting me to share a few thoughts with you today at the Chamber's Women's Empowerment Luncheon.

Now, I have watched Ms. Baptiste lead like an old-school Baptist deaconess for years. And for those of you unfamiliar with Black church mothers, let me explain something to you: they do ALL things in decency and in order. They are organized, discerning, and they do not fall fast for the newly saved. You know the type — the folks who found religion in prison, come home holier than thou, and then fall apart at the first sip of liquor.

Church mothers know how to test spirits. They make sure you are REAL and not performing.

So when Ms. Baptiste reached out, I really wanted to say no because… #IssaTired. But I also knew it was an honor to make the Baptiste list.

Seriously though, I am truly honored to be here today. I'll share a few thoughts and then get out of your way.

I know this is a Women's Empowerment Luncheon, and I appreciate the enlightened men who are in the room today, but my remarks are really for the women. The women who know at least one woman who has been laid off and is now part of the more than 600,000 Black women seeking employment. The women who have had to pivot, reinvent themselves, or step out on faith and become entrepreneurs.

We are living through a moment where women — especially Black women — are being asked to carry extraordinary burdens while receiving diminishing support. In moments like this, I believe we need three things: sisterhood, allyship, and support.

Sisterhood looks like a wellness check. It looks like a phone call just to ask, "Sis, how are you really doing?" It looks like dropping off a home-cooked meal, opening a bottle of wine, or having a Netflix night just to help someone take their mind off the stress of unemployment, caregiving, business pressures, or simply surviving.

Allyship requires honesty and clarity. I have learned that some of our allies need direct and unfiltered instructions. So if you have friends, colleagues, or partners who do not share your lived experience, this is not the season to be vague.

If you need a job, say that.
If you need a contract, say that.
If you need an introduction, say that.
In this economic and political climate, the squeaky wheel gets the oil.

And finally, support.

Support means circulating job leads. It means recommending qualified Black women when consulting and contracting opportunities arise. It means speaking our names in rooms we may not yet have access to. It means investing in Black women-owned businesses, not just applauding them on social media.

Because empowerment is not just motivational language. Empowerment is access. Empowerment is opportunity. Empowerment is economics. And empowerment is making sure no woman in our community has to navigate difficult seasons alone.

And I know a little something about difficult seasons because I have had many. And let me tell you something: not all difficult seasons end up on Instagram.

In 2024, I left corporate America, where I worked as a lobbyist, and stepped out on faith to become an entrepreneur after hitting my head against the corporate glass ceiling one too many times. I knew my value after putting out fire after fire to protect somebody else's brand.

So I decided to bet on myself.

I stepped out on faith because faith was all I had.

I had no business plan. No roadmap. Nothing but an unshakable belief that I knew what I knew.

And during my first year in business, things went well. Most of my contract work was with national clients, and business was good.

But 2025 became both my most difficult year and, strangely enough, my best year — personally and professionally.

Since this is a business luncheon, let me use some business language. In Q1, I had the audacity to run for Secretary of the Democratic National Committee, a 480-member organization. Although my campaign was unsuccessful, I had the opportunity to meet and build relationships with people in every single state and territory in this country.

Now…how many people in this room can say you know somebody who lives in Guam?

But running for office — whether for party leadership or public office — is challenging mentally, physically, emotionally, and economically.

And after the election, I had to step away from my business to regroup spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

Again, not every difficult season gets posted online. Social media will have you believing everybody is winning all the time, and that simply is not true.

So today, I want to publicly thank some of the women in this room who carried me during that season. The women who checked on me. The women who prayed for and with me. The women who reminded me who I was when I was too exhausted to remind myself. The women who reminded me of my why.

Momma LaRue and so many others — thank you.

But it was Rev. Dr. Deborah Stapleton who truly stopped me in my tracks. She called me, heard the emotion in my voice, and knew I was trying to avoid vulnerability. She would not allow me to run from my emotions. She made me stand still in that moment and feel them.

And I cried like a baby.

Me. The strong one.

Rev. Stapleton spoke life into me. She reminded me that the best was still yet to come.

The women who held me up during those dark days reminded me of the women in Chapin, South Carolina, where I grew up in community. As a child, I watched church mothers and women from the neighborhood gather together to make quilts. My grandmother brought patches of fabric. Other women brought spools of thread.

And together, they made more than quilts.

They built community.
They stitched together sisterhood.
They created warmth for families during hard times.
And eventually, those quilts became heirlooms passed from one generation to the next.

To this day, I am grateful to still have some of those quilts made by those women.

Jeannine, Rev. Stapleton, Denise — you are modern-day quilt makers for me and for so many other women in distress.

And in this season, all of us are being called to help stitch another woman's square.

Amen.

From January to September, I barely worked.

It wasn't until I received the call to work on Mikie Sherrill's gubernatorial campaign that I returned to work full-time. And let me tell you — it was truly God's timing.
Because sometimes, during difficult seasons, we think we are being buried, when in reality, we are being planted. We think the silence means abandonment, when often it is preparation.

And what I learned during that season is this: your worth is not determined by your productivity. Your value is not diminished because you need time to heal, regroup, or rediscover yourself.

Sometimes the most powerful thing a woman can do is pause, survive, and begin again.

And what came next was remarkable.
What came next was deeply spiritual.

Now, so we are not here all day, let me get straight to the climax: God placed it in my spirit to organize Black men.

Not this group or that group or the other group.

Black men.

Men who were hurting.
Men who were isolated.
Men who were carrying silent burdens while trying to hold together families, businesses, communities, and themselves.

And I know some people thought it was odd — maybe even unreligious — for a woman to organize Black men, as if Black women, the mothers of Black men, have not been organizing with and for Black men since Adam and Eve. SMDH.

While still processing one of the hardest seasons of my own life, I took on the emotional labor of creating space for Black men to be seen, heard, and supported.

But that assignment healed me too.

And we're not done yet.

Q4 ended with a victory — not just for Governor Sherrill, but for Black men too. After the election, I began receiving calls from Black men in Mississippi, Georgia, Florida, and Washington, DC asking about our program.

And just last week, I signed a contract with the National Urban League to embark on a national tour to raise money in support of their civic engagement work.

And yes — we're going to organize Black men there too.

So in closing, I want to remind every woman in this room — the corporate girlies, the entrepreneurs, the caregivers, the mothers, the dreamers, and the women quietly trying to hold it all together:

When man closes one door, God opens another.

And sometimes, He opens a door so big that it changes not only your life, but the lives of others connected to your purpose.

Thank you.