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Sticking to His Plan: An Interview with Dedication Day Keynote Speaker LeVar Burton

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Abstract

The week before Dedication Day I had the privilege of interviewing keynote speaker and Emmy Award-winning actor LeVar Burton, who has starred in *Roots*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and *Reading Rainbow*. I knew this was the perfect opportunity to engage in a serious dialogue about race, as the most dramatic and consequential presidential elections had been decided just a week previous, and I was thrilled when Mr. Burton answered all of my questions with poise and understanding, charging head-on into difficult but immensely relevant topics. The messages he conveyed are powerful and will stick with me as I navigate the political climate of the next four years (and beyond), and his call to action has encouraged me to seek meaningful and effective ways of promoting tolerance and pursuing change. I know his words will have the same effect on many of you.

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

Gettysburg College, Civil War, Dedication Day, LeVar Burton, Lincoln

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Sticking to His Plan: An Interview with Dedication Day Keynote Speaker LeVar Burton

By Annika Jensen '18

The week before Dedication Day I had the privilege of interviewing keynote speaker and Emmy Award-winning actor LeVar Burton, who has starred in *Roots*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and *Reading Rainbow*. I knew this was the perfect opportunity to engage in a serious dialogue about race, as the most dramatic and consequential presidential elections had been decided just a week previous, and I was thrilled when Mr. Burton answered all of my questions with poise and understanding, charging head-on into difficult but immensely relevant topics. The messages he conveyed are powerful and will stick with me as I navigate the political climate of the next four years (and beyond), and his call to action has encouraged me to seek meaningful and effective ways of promoting tolerance and pursuing change. I know his words will have the same effect on many of you.



Mr. Burton graciously consented to a photograph and group hug with student Luke Frigon, the author, and Penny Isherwood's esteemed mother, Sam. Photo courtesy of the author.

I extend my sincerest thanks to Mr. Burton not only for agreeing to be interviewed, but for giving all of us something to think about. Here is what he said.

The Gettysburg Compiler: Considering the historical significance of Gettysburg and the role of race in the Civil War, how can we create and foster dialogue about race on campus after this month's election results?

LeVar Burton: My decision since [the election] has been to rededicate myself to the work I consider my life's mission. In the service of that, I've promised myself that today and tomorrow and Saturday and every day I am able, for the remainder of my life, to speak my truth. Having grown up a black person I have often times held my tongue when I wanted to say what was in my heart for fear of offending the majority population. However, the difference between where we are now and Lincoln's time is the majority population is no longer the majority. This country has changed dramatically. The Civil War and the necessity for Lincoln's address in Gettysburg was in response to a changing America, even then. I have no problem saying now that I do not believe at all that the primary reason for that conflict was not over people that looked like me. My commitment is to speak my truth and to keep looking for ways to do that while still being inclusive and allowing for the reality that fully half the people in this country think and believe opposite to the way I do about issues like justice, freedom, equality, and civil rights. In order to avoid another bloody conflict we're going to have to do exactly what you said: discover language that allows us to be in the room long enough to identify that which we have in common. Use words like "and" instead of "but." Really relearn how to communicate in a civil manner. So, my plan is to really focus on the integrity of the truth of my experience in the country. That's my plan, and I'm sticking to it.

GC: On the subject of the Gettysburg Address, how should we interpret and act on Lincoln's message today?

LB: Given where we are today it's pretty clear that we haven't done such a good job of embracing his message, of moving into action since the day he delivered it. I have no idea. I am genuinely at a loss.

GC: What is your view of the Confederate flag and its role in society and public spaces?

LB: You're not pulling any punches, are you? On a personal level, I detest what it stands for. A lot of people feel that it is a symbol that represents history and honor and valor, and I do not deny any of those things. Yeah, it does represent a certain amount of honor and a great deal of valor for those who fought, and still the history that it represents is one that tried to annihilate people who look like me.

I am very much in support of the removal of that flag in public spaces. I do not believe it's appropriate to fly a swastika. Those who revert to the argument that it was only about states' rights are only telling half the truth. They're just not willing to admit. I think it's a polarizing symbol. I think in large measure those who continue to try to hold onto it are trying to hold on to a way of thinking and behaving that has outlived itself in today's world.

GC: What are your thoughts on millennials and political engagement?

I have children who are millennials, and I see that there is a lot of passion present in this generation. I admire and respect that. I have no issues with millennials and their level of political awareness and passion. I welcome their energy and efforts in this ongoing struggles. It's a principle that I deeply believe in.

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