I stand here surprised, proud, humbled, and a bit intimidated to be among so many friends, colleagues and supporters. I am deeply appreciative of the Liberty Bank Foundation for their work to recognize those individuals working to celebrate diversity. Liberty Bank stands as an industry pillar for establishing and awarding the Willard M. McRae Community Diversity Award for the past two decades and walking the talk in their corporate practices. I salute the many past Diversity Award winners and the current nominees as well. I am honored to stand in their presence. The recognition and celebration of diversity should be one of the most important priorities in our American society and we need champions who believe in and nurture it.

When I look back at my upbringing, it is strange that I have arrived where I am today. I grew up in an all-white neighborhood in Rochester New York, went to all-white Catholic schools through high school and a mostly white college. Looking back, I was really sheltered and naïve when it came to experiencing other cultures.

I came to Connecticut in 1967 to be a child care worker for troubled boys at Mt. St. John School and everything changed. I was responsible for working with and supervising teenage boys from many cultures. I soon realized boys were boys and I enjoyed passing on the skills I had learned as a kid: fishing, archery, basketball and wrestling. I also realized how important it was to help them develop a positive sense of self-esteem and pride in themselves and the culture they came from.

In 1972, I came to Meriden to be the Director of The Curtis Home for Children: a residential center for troubled younger children, both boys and girls. Here I was able to provide opportunities for the children to participate in cultural activities and events.

One of the first of these was the Black Unity Expo Festival where we teamed up with MT. Hebron Baptist Church and other area churches to put on a fun-filled event in local parks.
This event carried on for over two decades. My golfing buddy Len McCain, the first black Director of The Meriden Health Department, and I, were the co-chairs for many years. We became good friends and he would occasionally confide in me. Once he told me about his experience driving while black in our community. He got stopped three separate times by local police officers while driving his clearly marked official city vehicle. He made me realize the heavy burden of trying to make it as a black man in our community, the added stress, anxiety and disrespect he had to endure. This made a profound impact on me and I have never forgotten it.

Later, he sought to be a nominated candidate for Board of Education and asked for my help. We teamed up again, ran a successful campaign, and he won the election becoming the first black man elected to the Meriden Board of Education in 30 years. Len was a strong voice for diversity for several years until he left Meriden for statewide office. Later, Len and his wife Mary retired to North Carolina and we still keep in touch to this day.

About the same time Black Expo was getting underway, I met Ms. Rhudean Raye who had started the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Albert Owens Scholarship Breakfast in the basement of the Parker AME Zion Church. It had recently moved to Maloney High School and I brought a group of Curtis Home children to the event. Afterwards I offered to help and proposed the idea of having a countrified breakfast funded by community sponsors. Rhudean liked the idea and every year since we have had a countrified breakfast. To date over $68,000 has been donated by these sponsors to pay for the breakfast.

Rhudean, and her small committee, has made the annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. /Albert Owens Scholarship Breakfast one of the best annual Connecticut events honoring the life of Dr. King. The next breakfast in on January 20 at Maloney High School and Congresswoman Jahana Hayes will be the keynote speaker.

Rhudean started in Meriden as an elementary school teacher, one of the first black teachers in Meriden and she was also a nurse. She taught my daughter Mandy in second grade and a few years ago I asked Mandy if she remembered Rhudean. She immediately started singing a negro spiritual that Rhudean had sung in her classroom. I was amazed that thirty years later Mandy remembered the song.
Rhudean, who is 93 years old and still sharp as a tack, has a great sense of humor. One day when Nancy, Rhudean and I were together, Nancy remarked how smooth Rhudean’s complexion was. Rhudean remarked “Black don’t crack” and we all cracked up.

In the early nineties at the Curtis Home, there were several Puerto Rican children in residence and we provided cultural opportunities for them as well. During the Three Kings celebration we invited cooks from Casa Boricua a local Hispanic agency to make home cooked Spanish meals for all the kids. The Spanish kids knew the names of everything and called out what we were eating. They were very proud to be “in the know” about this new meal.

It was also during this time that a small group of us started a new Puerto Rican Family Day Festival to celebrate the Puerto Rican Culture and share it with the wider community. Members from Curtis Home, Casa Boricua and The Meriden Hispanic Foundation came together for our first planning meeting. I was the only gringo and I came with my notepad ready to set up committees and develop an organizational chart. All the Latinos had a different way to run things and they began talking about their family members, cousins, aunts and uncles, friends and other people they knew who would take on the different tasks bringing food, getting music, and a cultural tent. This was foreign to me and I thought to myself, “this is not going to work.”

To my great surprise, everything came together beautifully for a great, well-organized and fun filled event. They were putting their faith in trusted family and friend relationships and that was the key to their success. I learned there was more than one way to do things.

Over time I made friends with Oscar Rosado, the president of the Meriden Hispanic Foundation, and his family. He invited me to several Hispanic events and activities. One was the annual Foundation Fundraising dance my wife and I attended. The salsa music started and we went out on the dance floor. There were 300 Latinos swaying back and forth to the music and one tall white guy in the middle bobbing up and down. I have never been able to get that hip-swaying move down but I love to watch those smooth Latin dance moves.
Oscar also invited me to my first pig roast. Nancy and I went to Angel’s house, his brother-in-law, where the picnic was taking place. There was Oscar driving the pig over a bed of coals. Actually, he held a steering wheel attached to an axle attached to the pig. Nancy said that looked like fun and wanted to try driving it. So Oscar slid over and Nancy took the wheel. She didn’t realize that the pig weighed more that she did and she nearlyflipped over, but no harm done. When the pig was done we all took our share and it was absolutely delicious. This started my new taste for Spanish food: pulled pork, rice and beans, plantains, empinatas, pinchos, and flan for dessert.

In 2009, the long-running Annual Meriden Puerto Rican Festival had been suffering from low attendance. The previous year had 350 people attending and one hot dog vendor. The organizer running it had some health issues and asked Hector Cardona Sr., a beloved Meriden police officer, to take it over. Hector agreed and I offered to help.

We gathered a small committee together to run the event. In our first year we had over 5,000 people, 54 vendor booths including 12 Spanish food vendors, live Latin Bands, amusements for the children, and a cultural tent. Our highlight festival year was two years ago when we had 8,500 people attending the 50th anniversary of the festival. This was one of the largest crowds ever to gather at the Hubbard Park bandshell. Many have told us we had the best Latin Festival in Connecticut.

In 1989, when I was first elected to city council, I put a call in to Pastor Willie Young of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church. I told Pastor Young his church was in my council district and to call me if he needed any help from. So Willie did. He had a funeral and needed the snow plow to open up his sidewalk, he wanted to get a parking lot for his church, he asked for help expanding the local playground. We worked together on many projects to make a better neighborhood. Mt. Hebron was an anchor in a challenging neighborhood and the church members were active in making positive contributions.

They began inviting me to church services and church functions. They even asked me to be one of the judges in the Church picnic Sweet Potato Pie contest. Truth be told, I had never had sweet potato pie before and they were all delicious. So I just chose one and it won a prize. Dumb luck!
Recently Bea Preston, one of those active leaders in the church, called me for some help planning Pastor Young’s 30th anniversary recognition. We decided on a rock with a plaque. I made a few phone calls to friends and we got a huge two-ton rock delivered and Bea had a beautiful bronze plaque attached commemorating Pastor’s three decades of dedicated service to Mt. Hebron Baptist Church and she managed to surprise Willie as well. By the way, Bea Preston is one of those active church leaders, a lady who makes good things happen.

A few years ago, when I was mayor, I went to the Meriden Ah-ma-diyya Mosque to thank them for putting on a blood drive. A member of the Mosque, Wajid Ahmed, asked if I was a blood donor. I told him I had cancer in 1986 and was told at that time I couldn’t donate blood anymore. Wajid said some rules had changed so I checked it out and ten minutes later I was on the table giving blood.

The mosque members never forgot this and they invited me to several services and events. One of these was the feast of Ramadan where members had fasted for 30 days. At the end of the service, they invited me to go first in the food line. I said to myself, “for the past 30 days I have had three meals a day plus snacks and some desserts while they have been fasting.” But they insisted, I felt a bit guilty going first but the food was delicious. I have since been back to donate blood and to other events as well. This Muslim community has been a very positive force in Meriden and their motto is: “Love for all, hatred towards none.”

Ten years ago, I became the Director of Community Relations for the Community Health Center. This phenomenal organization prizes diversity and serves everyone. Each exam room throughout the state has a language line with 140 different languages.

We have mandated cultural competence training for all staff; do outreach to special populations; walk the diversity talk; and are constantly pushing the envelope to offer new and better healthcare services to a very diverse population. I am proud to be part of this team of caring, competent, and passionate professionals who celebrate diversity every day.
In conclusion, once again I thank the Liberty Bank Foundation for bestowing this honor on me this evening and for creating this phenomenal party for me and for all of you who came here to join the fun. I have been so blessed to have so many great friends and colleagues who have enriched my life beyond measure and I am deeply grateful. Tonight I am so happy to share a small snapshot of the many joys and accomplishments we have been part of.

I am just blown away that a sheltered white guy from Rochester NY can stand here before you so full of joy, pride, and appreciation with all of you who have been part of my life’s journey. There are some who say we should tolerate those different from us. This is such a low bar and so arrogant.

Tolerate, Really? How about engage others, learn about others, help others, and make friends with others? Let’s kick it up a notch.

Once again thank you for your friendship, support, and all you do to celebrate Diversity, and making this a better community and better world. We are all one race. The Human Race.