

Kellen Winslow gives inspiring speech at 50th Alton NAACP Freedom Fund dinner

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
May 7 2018 12:04 PM







ALTON – “We have to start teaching our kids they can do anything, go anywhere, they can achieve anything they set their mind on, and we've got to get them thinking about bigger, bigger, bigger things.” Those were perhaps the most compelling words of East St. Louis native and Pro Football Hall of Famer Kellen Winslow at the 50th annual Alton Branch of the NAACP Freedom Fund Banquet at the Atrium at the Alton Best Western Premier hotel.

“Why do we have an NAACP?, was another key question Winslow answered in his presentation.

“We have an NAACP because there was oppression; there still is oppression.”

The NAACP banquet's theme was “The Journey is Not Over After 50 Years. Let's Do More!”

In addition to Winslow's speech, community-service awards were presented to Anita Banks, Joe Williams and Abe Barham, renewing college scholarship awards were presented to Kiara Hardimon and Shantal Terrell and new college scholarship awards were presented to Trinity Brooks of Marquette Catholic and Kevin Caldwell Jr. of Alton High School.

Winslow graduated from East St. Louis Senior High in 1975 and went to the University of Missouri on a football scholarship after playing just his senior year with the Flyers, becoming one of the standout tight ends in college football during this time with the Tigers, begin selected by the then-San Diego Chargers with the 13th pick of the 1979 NFL Draft, going on to become one of the great tight ends in NFL history with the Chargers. He was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, as part of the Class of 1995 with Lee Roy Selmon, Steve Largent, Henry Jordan and Jim Finks.

“Our institutions in this government were racist – they were built on racist thoughts – and executed,” Winslow said in his speech to the gathering. “Slavery still haunts us today, just like the Jewish people were haunted – not by the Holocaust, but by their enslavement by Egypt. It still haunts those races of people; it's passed down from one generation to the next, and we – as people of color – have to stop passing down those negative things to our children.”

Winslow has worked in higher education since retiring from the Chargers, including a stint as athletic director at Florida A&M (a noted Historically Black College and University, or HBCU). “I've worked in higher education for a number of years; I've been at different schools, two HBCUs, and two predominantly white institutions – that's how we refer to them – predominantly white insinuations. Why? Because they're predominantly white down there.

“The dreams that I see coming from children who are coming from lesser socioeconomic situations, when I ask them what they want to do – they want to go back home, and their dreams are to open up a barbershop, a beauty salon, teach at their high school, be a coach – and I'm going, 'wow – OK? We've got to figure this out.

“You're coming here on a math scholarship – why don't you want to get a Ph.D. and teach at the college level? Because they never knew anybody who did that, so we have to challenge them to get moving in the right direction; we've got to get them thinking about bigger things.”

Those challenges still continue today, Winslow believes. “When you say slavery was a long time ago, that's slave thinking, passed down from one generation to the next,” Winslow said. “Your limited exposure to the world - in this United States, not a Third-World Country – your limited exposure to this world has them thinking that, on a college campus, the only thing I want to do – my only dream - is to go back home.

“That is not a mind that is ready to go on to do bigger and greater things because they've been told that they can't; they've been told verbally, they've been told unconsciously, they've been told by society. We spend most of our time suppressing the best and the brightest. We've got to find the best and the brightest because our system is not set up to

find the best and the brightest. When are we going to change and start working together, not just as black people, white people, Jewish people, Catholic people – just people who want the best for everybody.”

In an interview with Winslow following his talk, when asked what it meant to come back to his home area and talk about what's currently going on, “the truth is the truth,” Winslow said. “You speak the truth and no one can really complain; they can argue differently, but we've got to do a better job than we're doing right now and we've got to stop making the same mistakes over and over.”

“I've talked to about 50 people and they're all talking about Mr. Winslow's message and the tremendous job he did,” said Alton Branch NAACP president Andy Hightower following the talk. “I can't say it any other way – just exceptional.”









