

Speaker says everyone has contribution to make

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In 1969, when Arthur Fletcher worked in the Department of Labor under President Nixon, the United States had a work force of 86 million people. Twenty percent of them were women and minorities.

Today, the work force is 168 million people, with 49.5 percent women and minorities. "Don't tell me affirmative action didn't work," Fletcher said Tuesday in a speech to the Evansville Rotary Club. "God didn't send any imbeciles here. He gave us all a gift. He gave us all capacity."

Fletcher, the father of Evansville Housing Authority Executive Director Paul Fletcher, was Nixon's assistant secretary of wage and labor standards. In that job, he developed the "Philadelphia Plan" to assist minority-owned businesses pursuing government contracts.

He was later an adviser to President Ford in urban affairs.

Known as the father of the "Affirmative Action enforcement movement," Fletcher, 78, still lives in Washington, D.C., and remains outspoken on the need to produce what he calls "human capital."

He said the message he brings around the country is "that everyone, race and gender notwithstanding, has a contribution to make."

He told the story of how after his professional football career with the Los Angeles Rams and Baltimore Colts ended in the 1950s, he was interested in getting a job in coaching. But no doors opened.

"The guy who taped my ankles in college ball got a job as a coach," Fletcher said. "That's when I knew something had to change, and if you can change the laws you can change the culture."

A graduate of Washburn University in Kansas, Fletcher worked with the Kansas Highway Commission and eventually landed at the Department of Labor.

"I really hate politics and don't like politicians, and I despise the political environment," Fletcher said. "But the big man upstairs told me, 'That's what I want you to do, brother.'"

Fletcher said Nixon told him to work on changing laws in a way that would enable more minorities to enter the work force.

"He said to convince Cabinet officers and convince people on the (Capitol) Hill," Fletcher said, adding that doing so wasn't easy.

He said that when he spoke in 1971 at the United Nations about diversity in the work force, "the communist bloc did a dance on me, and the socialist bloc tried to run me out."

In today's environment, Fletcher said, many people don't know about legislation already on the books aimed at promoting diversity. He said that's the theme of his upcoming nationwide speaking tour, which will take him to 36 U.S. cities.

Now more than ever, Fletcher said, children of all backgrounds need quality education to succeed.

"Kids today are going to have to compete with some of the toughest competition in the world," Fletcher said. "I just came back from Africa, from Europe. They're out to get us."

http://www.myinky.com/ecp/news/article/0,1626,ECP_734_2348141,00.html

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