



FOUNDER'S MESSAGE



THE ETHOS OF EMPOWERMENT

BY

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Empowerment is a concept and experience that challenges the status quo. Central to the concept of empowerment is the belief that power, in and of itself, does not exist in isolation nor is it inherent in individuals. Power is created in relationships: individual, familial, communal, and political. Empowerment, therefore, is best understood in the context of dynamic relationships geared toward positive change.

During the past quarter century of my involvement in public service I have focused my energies on increased civic participation and citizen empowerment to stimulate and spur the revitalization of urban Los Angeles and the betterment of the greater metropolis. My goal has always been to **educate, engage and empower** people and communities. Whether in the areas of policy formulation, living-wage-job creation, voter registration or the promotion of non-violence, I have sought partnering as the vehicle to achieve both self and community actualization with individuals and organizations who believe that our communities are our shared responsibility.

When we work collaboratively - young and old, African American and Latino, Asian Pacific Islander and White, Christian, Muslim and Jew - based on mutual respect - our achievements are all the more meaningful. It is really the only way we can become equal in and accountable for solving the complex issues that face our communities. This nexus of individual and collective responsibility is the bedrock of empowerment.

It was while serving as a Los Angeles City Councilmember for the Eighth District from 1991-2002, that I became more grounded in my belief that empowerment, as both mantra and model, was necessary to effectively serve those who elected me to public office. It was in that office that we refined the concept of empowerment and introduced the Empowerment Congress. This structure became the precursor to the current citywide system of Neighborhood Councils. These Councils are chartered to foster active, meaningful, organized and functional partnerships between City officials and the residents they represent.

At the height of its effectiveness, the Eighth District Empowerment Congress consisted of hundreds of constituent participants, seventy of whom were elected by their peers to positions of leadership in the organization. The Council district was divided into four distinct regions, and the Empowerment Congress was organized into committees to facilitate a telescopic focus on identified issues as well as to increase the potency and efficiency of our collective effort.



Among the overarching issues addressed by the Congress were environmental justice, public safety, economic development and violence prevention. Some constituents chose to focus on very specific projects such as an innovative electronic citizenship project and a groundbreaking pet overpopulation ordinance. We also focused on the more traditionally transparent and publicly debated issues such as City budget priorities and the naming of neighborhoods throughout the City of Los Angeles. Together, we pursued a progressive legislative agenda and built a \$500 million dollar economic development legacy for which every single member of the Empowerment Congress can proudly claim some measure of credit.

This model of empowerment is grounded in an understanding that individuals who gain power by engaging and becoming active in their communities and their government are actually strengthening the power of others rather than diminishing it. Public officials, community organizations, businesses and schools owe a great deal of gratitude to those who individually or collectively come together to effect community engagement. The interconnection and interaction between the individual and community is the very essence of empowerment. It is in this context that individual activism leads to social, political and economic change.

The Empowerment Congress is the first of its kind to be introduced at the state level in California. It is rapidly evolving into the kind of policy-shaping, people-motivating catalyst as its forerunner, the Eighth District Empowerment Congress. Fortunately, the opportunities and challenges presented by the prospect of maintaining existing and establishing new effective working relationships with more neighborhood councils, homeowner associations, block clubs, as well as numerous business associations in the 26th district was tested over the past four years when we established the 48th Assembly District Empowerment Congress in 2003.

From Culver City to West Los Angeles to Silver Lake to Exposition Park to Vermont Knolls the Empowerment Congress is now firmly rooted in the precept that true participatory democracy is where everyone has a voice and a corresponding responsibility to a shared community. Perhaps the best display of the strength, diversity, commitment and purpose of the Empowerment Congress is our 15th Anniversary Celebration that has brought together people of different ages, faiths, orientations and views to dialogue, enjoy fellowship, teach and learn. This is the ethos of empowerment: **The Power of People.**

On behalf of the Empowerment Congress 15th Anniversary Celebration Steering Committee, and the newly installed Empowerment Congress Leadership Council, I thank you for your commitment, participation and support.

Mark Ridley-Thomas currently serves as Senator for the 26th Senate District and is the Chairman of the Committee on Business, Professions and Economic Development. Senator Ridley-Thomas is the founder and chairman of both the California Community Empowerment Foundation and the African American Voter Registration, Education and Participation project. The Senator holds a PhD in Social Ethics and Policy Analysis from the University of Southern California. He is a lifelong resident of Los Angeles and is married to Avis Ridley-Thomas, the Director of the Los Angeles City Attorney's Office Dispute Resolution Center. They are the proud parents of twin sons, Sebastian and Sinclair who are sophomores at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia.