As prepared.

Thank you, Dr. Whitehead, for the invitation to be on this panel, for your kind introduction, and for the opportunity for me to share my personal reflections on this tragic event.

In the early 1970s, I was a graduate student in public health at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor when the infamous U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study on black men was released. This study had been conducted in my hometown of Tuskegee, Alabama, and my own relatives—including Misters Rufus Neal, Rueben Neal, and Freddie Lee Tyson—had been subjected to life-threatening misinformation about the medical care given to them.

I was born at the John A. Andrew Hospital on the campus of what was then Tuskegee Institute. Both my parents, Mr. Homer Lewis Neal Sr., and Mrs. Rosa Neal Harris, studied and for years worked on the campus of Tuskegee. As a child, I attended both private and public schools in Tuskegee, a close-knit community that represented the pride of the swift-growing South, and received a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Tuskegee Institute.

In 1972, the Associated Press published the first article exposing details of the Syphilis Study involving more than 600 black men. Official acknowledgement of the discriminatory study, after
a silence of 40 years, released personal heartache and shame for many of us in my proud hometown—a town that celebrated the victories of the courageous Tuskegee Airmen, African-American pilots, who trained on the campus and fought for their country in Europe during World War II.

We never expected our government to experiment on members of our own community. In the years to come, wives and other relatives of those subjected to this abuse of power lived with the shame, and until recently, suffered in silence,

Doctors Harrell, Wilson, and I are now working with the women descendants of the study to help tell their stories. It’s been a privilege to collaborate with these prominent scholars, and to have nurtured a wonderful friendship as a result of our work. Indeed, the most fruitful and enduring partnerships unite both the heart and the mind.

Today, twenty years after the presidential apology for the Syphilis Study, and 45 years after news of this study came to light about how African American men were being used so inhumanely, data show that medical mistrust remains a serious issue for African Americans and other ethnic minorities today. One of our distinguished guests to the University of Richmond this past spring, Dr. Louis Sullivan, former U.S. Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, stated: “There is clear, undeniable evidence of discrimination and racism in our health care system.”
Sadly, the health disparities in health outcomes and care received based on race and ethnicity in the United States have not substantially improved. And suspicion lingers.

My family, my love for Tuskegee, and my chosen profession link me to the history of this morally flawed experiment. It would be easy for me and other people of color to question if trust can ever be rebuilt. Yet as a person of color raised in a community of values, of virtues, and of visions, I, like you, see education as one way forward.

With your presence here, we hope you also share the values, the virtues, and the visions that have brought this session together, and possess a willingness to learn from a shameful past to forge a better path ahead. To share an American story—one of perseverance in the face of unimaginable pain.

In moving forward, we all have a choice: to perpetuate hatred and distrust, or serve as vessels for greater understanding and healing. Past wounds cannot be completely healed, but current and new generations can take part in the healing.

From the White House in 1997, 25 years after the Associated Press broke the story of the study, President Bill Clinton issued the national apology, stating, “… we must work harder to see that as we advance we don’t leave behind our conscience. No ground is gained and, indeed, much is lost if we lose our moral bearings in the name of progress.”

Twenty years later, these words hold true.
Our challenge today is to candidly and honestly assess our history. To believe that every human deserves fair and equitable treatment. As Booker T. Washington, the founder of Tuskegee Institute, once said, we must use education and understanding to lift the veil of ignorance.

At the University of Richmond, where my husband serves as President, we are fostering greater understanding in many ways. For example, Dr. Vivian Pinn, a 1967 graduate of the University of Virginia Medical School, and the only woman or African-American in her class who just last month had a UVA Medical Research Building named in her honor, is serving as the Leader-in-Residence at our Jepson School of Leadership Studies. Together, we are educating the next generation of ethical leaders who will right wrongs, and seek to ensure equitable healthcare across our nation.

This is why we’re here—in this moment, this time, and at this place. Let us continue to move beyond the raw history of medical mistrust to support the most vulnerable among us, confront bias and injustice where it lingers, and promote equality in health and medical treatment for all. Let us honor the silenced voices of our ancestors, and create a new future where everyone is valued.

Thank you for listening to a descendent who shares the pain and shame of this tragic American story—but, so too, shares with each of you the hope of healing, progress, and unity. Thank you to all for being with us here today.