

2020 State of the City Address by Mayor G.T. Bynum

Thank you for that introduction and to everyone who is joining us today virtually. A year ago, when we were at this event and celebrating the passage of Improve Our Tulsa by the largest victory margin of any citywide election in modern Tulsa history, we were together and unified in purpose. We had set aside those things that historically divided Tulsa in exchange for record-breaking collaboration that was moving our city forward. No one in that room had ever heard of COVID-19.

Today, a year later, we are physically divided for our own safety and our city has been through one of its most challenging years. We are in the midst of a global pandemic and a national recession. Businesses have suffered and closed. We faced a reckoning around the racial disparities that were allowed to go unspoken in our city for decades. We buried two brave police officers, one killed by a murderer and the other by a virus. We experienced a divisive national election and all the worst that partisanship has to offer.

Normally, in a state of the city address I have a laundry list of accomplishments to offer up and exciting plans for the future. This year has all those things too, but when we have been through such a trying time and we're all watching this remotely I want to offer a different kind of speech. This has been a historic year for Tulsa, so I would like to reflect on three crucial moments and why they have prepared us for what lies ahead.

Before I get to that, though, I want to thank a few people.

First, I want to thank the citizens of Tulsa for the honor of giving me another four years to serve you. Being mayor of Tulsa has been my dream job since I was about 8 years old, and the knowledge that you have given me the opportunity to serve in this job longer than all but four Tulsans in the entire history of our city means more than I can say. I will devote all I have over the next four years to being worthy of the trust you've placed in me.

I want to thank the Tulsa Regional Chamber for the extraordinary leadership you've shown in a very hard year. We'll get to that in more detail in a moment, but I am so grateful to have the best Chamber in America as my partner in the economic growth of our city.

I want to thank my partners in all we do at the City of Tulsa: City Auditor Cathy Carter, and my colleagues on the Tulsa City Council. Councilors Hall-Harper, Cue, Patrick, McKee, Fahler, Dodson, Decter-Wright, Lakin, and Kimbro have had to govern through a series of challenges over the last year. We continue to set a different standard of collaboration than Tulsans had to experience in the past, and I am thankful for their devotion to Tulsa. I am looking forward to a similar working relationship with our two incoming councilors, Mykey Arthrell and Jayme Fowler.

I want to thank our team at the City of Tulsa. They have continued to adapt through a challenging year, they face a viral threat with courage in the field, and they do it all while sacrificing their own pay for the chance to serve the citizens of Tulsa.

Lastly, I want to thank my family. I would never wish on anyone what they have had to go through this year, but they continue to lift me up with their love and support.

The first moment I want to talk about began in March.

On March 6, we learned that the first case of coronavirus in Oklahoma had been identified in Tulsa. 10 days later, we began to limit gatherings of more than 50 people. The day after that - Saint Patrick's Day - we closed restaurants and bars citywide. A week after that, we limited all gatherings citywide to 10 people or less. And four days after that, Tulsa entered its "shelter in place" protocol.

In 22 days, we went from identifying the first case in our city to a citywide shutdown. Through all of these unprecedented actions, our community's guiding necessity was to prevent an overwhelming of our health care infrastructure so our hospital systems could acquire the equipment, personnel, and processes necessary to safely treat our fellow Tulsans most in need of medical care. And we did it.

When we all have the benefit of time and distance, I think we will look back on Tulsa's response to COVID-19 as one of the greatest humanitarian efforts in our city's history.

Tulsans citywide willingly sacrificed their own livelihoods in order to protect their neighbors. Health care professionals courageously went to work every day, standing on the front lines against a virus to which no one was immune. Tulsans set up protective equipment drives for our medical professionals and first responders. We put up Christmas lights in March to show our solidarity with the neighbors we couldn't visit. We funded no-interest loan programs for small businesses and volunteered as financial navigators to help small businesses identify state and federal funding that could help them through this time.

And we innovated. We all learned the joys and perils of virtual meeting platforms. We started ordering curbside pick-up to support local restaurants. Those same restaurants built outdoor dining options. The historic Admiral Twin became a hub of our community for safe, socially-distanced events. The Tulsa Chamber purchased protective equipment in bulk to provide local small businesses what they needed to operate safely. Businesses throughout our city found new ways to offer their services safely. Our team at the City of Tulsa did more to change the way it does business between March and June of this year than it had in the previous 50 years.

In short, Tulsans took what was in front of us and we handled it. Day by day. Step by step. We did not allow a historic pandemic to make us a city of victims. By June, we drove our hospitalization rate down to the lowest of any point during the pandemic. We focused on managing what we could control, and we continue to do so.

The next moment I want to talk about occurred in late May, but it really began much earlier than that.

Imagine you're in your home at night just as summer is about to begin. And late that night there's a knock on your door. The person at your door tells you that a riot has commenced, and for your own safety you have to come with them to a downtown arena. You go to that arena, and then you're locked inside for three or four days. During that time, you have no phone and no way of knowing what is going on outside the walls of that arena. And then after several days the doors are opened, and you're allowed to leave, but when you walk home your entire neighborhood is burned to the ground. Your home, and all the possessions and memories it contains, are burned to the ground. Your business is burned to ground. In the days ahead, you realize there are members of your family who have gone missing and no one can tell you where they are. And yet not a single person is ever convicted of doing this to you, your family, or your neighbors. No one tracks your missing family down. You're told to forget it, to not talk about it, to move on.

Imagine that happening to you. If you were a Black Tulsan in 1921 and were a survivor of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, that's what happened to you. If you were a victim, it was far worse. And when we think about that event not as something that happened in history but as something that happened to our neighbors, and then we see modern day statistics nearly a century later showing a kid in North Tulsa is expected to live 11 years less than a kid elsewhere in the city, we can't be surprised by the pain and anger that came forward in protests that emerged both in Tulsa and across the country this past May and June following the death of George Floyd.

Peaceful protests offered an opportunity for Tulsans to make their voices heard in opposition to discrimination and the racial disparities that exist in our city. Unfortunately, some protests were coopted by criminals - many of whom don't even live in Tulsa - who chose to capitalize on an opportunity to hide under the veil of political speech as they destroyed public and private property. It would be a great disservice to our city if we allowed those actions to distract us from hearing the important messages being conveyed by so many good people in our community.

We are a city of faith. We are a city that believes every life is sacred. And if we are to be a city that is worthy of the love and reverence so many of us place in Tulsa, we must be a city that addresses the racial disparities that are robbing kids in North Tulsa of a decade of their life.

For the last four years, we brought the resources of the city to bear on that life expectancy gap - a statistic which is a symptom of many factors, including historic underinvestment from an economic development standpoint, lack of access to quality public transportation, lack of access to fresh food and vegetables, and more.

And we've made progress. We've attracted over \$1 billion in private investment to North Tulsa in the last four years, while partnering with local job training experts like Tulsa Tech and Tulsa Community WorkAdvance to make sure people living in the area benefit from the jobs created. We established one of the nation's first bus rapid transit lines along Peoria Avenue to 56th Street North, and recently through a partnership with Tulsa County extended service into Turley. Through a partnership with Tulsa Economic Development Corporation we are financing a new grocery store at Peoria and Pine. And we've created the Mayor's Office of Resilience & Equity, which is carrying out the Resilient Tulsa Strategy - the City's first comprehensive plan to address inequality in Tulsa.

And while the work of the city government on this front is important, what inspires me the most is the work I've seen every day Tulsans do in spite of all the challenges 2020 has presented.

We've seen the descendants of 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre victims and survivors leading the historic effort to find missing graves from that event. We've seen the emotion from researchers when they made a break-through discovery on that front in October. So many people want to do right by our fellow Tulsans who were murdered in 1921. Today we are a community willing to pursue the truth wherever it leads.

That's why we've seen community leaders break ground this year on a museum - Greenwood Rising - that will educate future generations about both the people who died and the people who rebuilt, so that others can learn the lessons that our worst moment has to teach.

We've seen a boom in scholarship around the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, with books and documentaries of national importance being produced by local authors and historians.

I am so grateful for all those who are motivated in this work by love of their neighbor, those who understand that we only move forward as a city if we quit demonizing others. The progress we will make in the years ahead is because of them.

The third moment I want to describe occurred at the end of June.

Around 4:30 in the morning on June 29, I received the call from Chief Franklin that every mayor dreads. Two brave Tulsa Police Officers had been shot in the line of duty.

That day in my mind is a blur, a vigil with the families and friends and fellow officers of Sergeant Craig Johnson and Officer Aurash Zarkeshan. After four years of local discussion about policing in which law enforcement officers are all too often spoken of as if they are some monolithic block, that morning our community was reminded that every single police officer protecting our community is someone's kid, someone's friend, often someone's spouse or parent. Every officer has a unique story about why they pursued this calling. Every officer has people around them who love them and worry about them, because of the risk they face every time they serve

our fellow Tulsans. And every officer chooses to take that risk in 2020, at a time when scrutiny and second-guessing about their motives and conduct has never been greater.

A few things happened in the following weeks.

Sergeant Johnson's memorial service was deeply moving, and then the procession began to the graveside service at the cemetery. Only this became so much more than a funeral procession. It became an expression of Tulsa's love in action.

It was a 12-mile drive from the church to the cemetery. Every foot of those 12 miles had people standing there to show their love and respect for Sergeant Johnson, his family, and his fellow officers. People of all ages holding signs and flags. Businesses changed their digital signs to offer messages of honor and respect. Firefighters stood at every intersection. For the rest of my life, I will never forget the way people from across this region came out to be there for the Johnson family and for our officers.

Then the TPD Foundation organized a fundraising drive to support the Johnson and Zarkeshan families. The line of cars to get into LaFortune Park to make a contribution extended for over a mile down Yale Avenue.

And the stories from that day are incredible. People pulling in with nothing but a few dollars they were going to use to pay for food that day but wanting the officers' families to have it instead. People making a donation, then going to an ATM and coming back to make another donation. People who had no money to speak of but wanted to give something to the families, so they would instead give items that belonged to them. And at the end of that drive, this community raised over \$600,000 for the families of those officers.

And a miracle happened: Officer Aurash Zarkeshan survived. The first time I visited him in the hospital after the shooting I just said a prayer for him. The second time I visited, he gave me a thumbs up. The third time, he shook my hand. No hand shake in my life has ever meant more than that one.

And months later, on the other side of rounds of medical treatment and therapy for him, I was able to visit him at his rehabilitation center. We sat outside on a sunny day, and I told him I couldn't believe I was sitting there talking with him after all he'd been through. On the day he returned to Tulsa, greeted at the airport by the cheers of so many who love him, he gave me a hug when he stepped off the plane. And in that moment, I thought the same thing that had come into my mind on so many days over the last several months: Thank God for Aurash Zarkeshan.

Today, Officer Zarkeshan is back at work at the Tulsa Police Department. Over the last few months, when a day is hard and the options all seem to be bad ones, if I start to feel sorry for myself I think about him. I think about how hard he has worked to recover - all that he has endured just so he can keep serving our city as a Tulsa Police Officer. I think about what his

doctors told me: that they'd never seen someone with such a positive mindset and focus on getting better. And then it puts everything in perspective. We could all be a little more like Officer Aurash Zarkeshan. And that is why Chief Wendell Franklin was so right when he started calling him "Tulsa's Hope". He is.

In each of these moments over the last year - through a pandemic, racial struggle, and tragic loss - our city has been knocked down. But we didn't stay down. Each time we stood back up. We stood up and we looked for our neighbors who needed help.

Many of us grew up hearing about Tulsa as a resilient city - a city founded by Creek Indians who would not be defeated, a city that grew because of pioneers and innovators who could endure the busts in search of the booms, a city of neighbors helping one another through tornados and floods and ice storms. These are the stories that inspire us in hard times and remind us of what Tulsans can accomplish when we work together.

But now the inspiration doesn't come from history. It comes from the present. We're proving ourselves worthy of the legacy that was won through hardship by those who came before us. Think about everything we've been through this year as a city - everything you and your family have been through. And yet, here we are - still moving forward, still thinking through how best to build a globally competitive, world class city.

And when you have a city like that, with people like that - even in one of the worst years any of us can remember - the state of our city is and will be strong.

And we need this city to be strong. Great challenges and hard days lie ahead.

We are seeing the spread of COVID-19 at an unprecedented rate in Oklahoma and in Tulsa County. For those of us who want to minimize the negative economic impact of fighting the virus, mask orders are the most effective mitigation strategy and they cause the least harm to local businesses when compared with occupancy restrictions or elective surgery bans or shutdowns. I am very grateful for the leadership shown by my colleagues in Jenks and Sapulpa, who were willing to acknowledge that we are in fact in the middle of a global pandemic and who chose not to ignore the pleadings of our hospitals and our health care leaders for mask orders that are proven to slow the spread of the virus. I continue to hope that more elected officials will follow the example of the great leaders in Jenks and Sapulpa.

We must also acknowledge that we will not change 100 years of racial disparity through one year of commemoration in 2021. It will require sustained devotion and commitment from people of every race in our city. It will require us to see the best in one another, and to act out of love and grace rather than anger.

And every morning, I put on this bracelet. It is a daily reminder to me of the life, service, and sacrifice of Sergeant Craig Johnson - and of the danger that awaits his brothers and sisters in

uniform every time they go to work. Most importantly, it reminds me of the responsibility each of us has to protect the protectors - to be there for them, just as they are there for us.

These and other great challenges face us. But we will greet each of them in the same way we've proven in 2020 that this generation of Tulsans responds to adversity: each time we're knocked down we will stand back up together, we will find those who need our help together, and we will move forward - together.

Thank you.