



Inaugural Address
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR JACQUELINE COLEMAN
December 12, 2023

Good afternoon. It is an honor to be with you in front of Kentucky's beautiful state Capitol, as your Lieutenant Governor and the first woman to ever take this oath of office twice.

Today, we gather on the steps of "the People's House," not as Democrats, Republicans, or Independents, but as Kentuckians.

As I look around, I am reminded that what unites us is far greater than what divides us.

I am grateful to see family and friends who support me and make it possible for me to do the work I love: my parents – particularly my dad, from whom compliments are hard to come by, so I'm glad we got his introduction on video; my husband and your Second Gentleman, Chris; Emma, Will, Nate, and Evelynne. I work towards a better Kentucky every day with you in mind.

And I'm grateful to see Governor Beshear and the First Family. It's truly an honor to serve alongside someone who treats every Kentucky family as his own. Governor, thank you for your leadership, your example, and for the opportunity you have given me to serve.

In the building behind us, we see memorials to Kentuckians who, while imperfect, rose to meet the challenges of their day – men like Abraham Lincoln, best known for holding the country together through the Civil War; Henry Clay, who history remembers as "the great compromiser"; and Nettie Depp, the first female statue in our state capitol – who also happened to be a teacher.

The Beshear-Coleman administration has forged its own path, but we never lost sight of the historic, uniquely Kentucky, symbolism around us. Because bringing people together through the toughest of times like Lincoln, finding common ground on the biggest issues of the day as Clay did, building a better future, one student at a time just like Nettie Depp, those time-honored values have echoed through the years and still guide us today.

The symbolism on these grounds is important, and so are the lessons we draw from it. But it is just as important what you don't see here today. There is an empty space in the rotunda where the statue of Jefferson Davis once stood. That is because we not only installed the capitol's first female statue, we also removed one that represented division.

Of course, removing a statue doesn't change history. But we can all agree that every Kentuckian – young and old, male and female, all colors, and all faiths, deserve to feel that they belong, if this is truly to be the "People's House."

I don't have to tell you that over the past four years, our commonwealth has faced historic tragedy. But my faith in Kentucky has never been stronger. We lost over 19,000 of our fellow Kentuckians to COVID. Tornadoes devastated entire communities in the west and flooding upended countless lives in the east. It was the worst of Mother Nature and yet the best of humanity.

We faced our challenges head-on because that is what we do, and we never backed down because that is who we are. I am so proud that we chose our health care heroes to lead today's inaugural parade. Because during the pandemic, you led us every step of the way, too. We see you and we are grateful for your work.

As the pandemic caused us all to feel anxious, isolated, and uncertain, the discussion surrounding mental health took center stage. Nationally, the #1 issue for parents was, and is, their child's mental health. But I did not like that I only heard adults talking to other adults about it. So, in Kentucky, we became a national leader by elevating student voice.

Our Student Mental Health Initiative has delivered \$40 million dollars in federal funding to Kentucky for school-based mental health services – and we are not done yet. To the student leaders joining us today who served as our North Star during this work, as well as the counselors and family resource coordinators who participated in today's parade, thank you. Your voices and your contributions are worth celebrating.

And that's true of so many Kentuckians – historically and today – including too many who don't always get the recognition and respect they deserve. From the beginning, Governor Beshear and I have worked to change that.

During our first term, we assembled the most diverse cabinet in Kentucky history. More women and minorities have been represented in leadership positions in our first four years than ever before. Because decisions shouldn't be made about us, without us.

When we took office, the Kentucky Commission on Women was inactive. Governor Beshear asked me to revive this initiative, and as the state's highest elected woman, I was honored to do so. This year, for the first time since 2014, the Commission inducted seven dynamic women from across the commonwealth into the Kentucky Women Remembered Hall of Fame. And there will be more, because representation matters.

These are the values that have helped pave the way to where we are today: our response to tragedy; our commitment to lifting the voices of every Kentuckian. That has shaped a future brighter than I could have imagined possible when I stood here four years ago.

Thanks to historic economic investment, unparalleled job creation, and record budget surpluses, Kentucky ranks #2 in the country in economic development. And as somebody from Burgin, one of the smallest towns in the commonwealth, the number I am most proud of, is that Kentucky skyrocketed to #3 in the nation in rural job creation. Because Governor Beshear and I believe in a Kentucky that lifts people up, and not one that leaves people out.

As we prepared for today's inauguration, I couldn't help but wonder, how will we be remembered, in this moment? As the Governor and I revisited memories of both the tragedies and the triumphs of the last four years, I remembered a saying I used as a basketball coach: "It's not what happens to you, it's how you react to it that matters."

And that helped me realize, it won't be a global pandemic, or historic tornadoes, or catastrophic flooding that will define us. It will be how we moved forward, together.

What I will remember about you, Kentucky, is how you sacrificed for each other through uncertain times. Neighbors – even complete strangers – showing up for one another in what had to be the darkest hour for so many families. And local and state leaders fulfilling our promise to be there until every structure and every life is rebuilt.

The goodness of our people restored my faith in humanity, over and over again. Showing up for one another has never been more important. And you can rest assured, that is what will guide our next four years.

Our service here is too short to be wasted on partisanship and political games. I think Abraham Lincoln and Henry Clay would agree; and I know Nettie Depp would agree that the next chapter of this story we are writing together shouldn't be about us. It should be about preparing the next generation of Kentuckians to harness this once in a lifetime opportunity we have worked so hard to create – for them.

Because, yes, our economy is booming. But we cannot lose sight that the future of Kentucky's economy is in our classrooms today.

Thank you to the educators who helped lead our parade today, just as you lead your communities every day. We cannot continue as the second-best state in economic development if we remain 40th in teacher pay. We will not stay #3 in rural job creation if we continue to underfund the largest employer in every rural community – their public school.

From cradle to career, education is the key that unlocks doors for every Kentuckian. Here's a perfect example: once we waived the GED testing fee, over 8,000 Kentuckians improved their education to get a job that was once out of reach. So now, let's turn to the opposite end of the spectrum: our littlest learners.

We cannot continue this historic momentum if our children's zip code determines their place in the world by the first day of kindergarten. That might sound hyperbolic, but follow me, here: Prison populations are projected by 3rd grade literacy rates. 3rd grade literacy rates are projected by kindergarten readiness. And kindergarten readiness is projected by access to pre-K.

Quite literally, we can invest in young people on the front end, or we will pay for it on the back end. The time for universal Pre-K in Kentucky is now.

Our education first administration chose an inaugural theme like "forward, together," for a reason. Because that is the kind of Kentucky our kids deserve. And that is the kind of leadership voters asked for.

I pledge to you, Kentucky, that we will continue to show up and extend our hand in the name of putting people over politics; that Governor Beshear and I will continue to set an example of decency and kindness that you can be proud of.

From the bottom of my heart: Thank you for believing in us, because we will never stop believing in you.

God bless you and may God continue to bless the commonwealth of Kentucky.

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