

DyNAMC Future Leader Speaks with *Assemblymember Tony Thurmond* “Emerging Leader to Seasoned Leader”



Left to Right: Assemblymember Tony Thurmond and NAMCO Student Member Astrid Flores, senior attending Richmond High School

DyNAMC Future Leader, NAMCO student Astrid Flores interviewed Assemblyman Tony Thurmond on March 13, 2015.

Astrid is an 18 year old senior at Richmond High School and resides in San Pablo, CA. She is very ambitious and is a strong leader. She is very involved in her school and community and has been Chair of the San Pablo Youth Commission for two years.

Astrid Flores (AF): You are being featured on the cover of **DyNAMC Leaders** for a Changing World magazine which is a magazine that highlights and champions the commitment of our nation’s top leaders, corporations, educators and policy makers who are dedicated to positive change in diversity and inclusion initiatives.

The **DyNAMC** team gives a great deal of thought into who graces the cover, and always selects individuals whose qualities, professionalism, and drive make them **DyNAMC Leaders** for a Changing World. What makes you a leader for the changing world?

Tony Thurmond (TT): I am honored to represent a community that’s constantly changing and has seen a lot of diversity and growth, and my focus is on listening and getting out and speaking to a lot of members of the community. When I served on the school board, I watched the growth and I watched the changes in the community. I watched the district grow to having more than 75 different languages spoken. I watched the school district grow to having more than 50 percent of the students and families being families that speak Spanish. So for me, my focus was on adult education for parents and bilingual education programs. I think that we need to always be aware of the changes. Just getting to this office I held probably 8 or 9 town hall meetings through all parts of the community to hear the concerns of the people of the community. I think that is what leadership does; listen to the community and try and make good policy for the people that we represent.

AF: How would you describe your leadership style?

TT: I strive to be a servant leader and to recognize that I been given this opportunity to serve and that I work for the people. So this isn’t about what I want, this is about trying to



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meet the needs of the people that I serve. Servant leadership is very important to me and trying to be able to say that people will be better off, as a result of my time served in this office, is always my focus.

AF: What is one characteristic that you believe every leader should have?

TT: Definitely being good listeners and listening to the different needs of the people that we represent. One thing I’ve learned in government is that you may think that everyone is thinking in the same way, but there are usually two sides to every issue. Sometimes there are more than two sides, because no one is the same. No one is impacted in the same way and a good leader has to be able to listen to all of the different ideas out there and do their own research and then, at the end of the day, make the best decision that they feel they can. Someone told me once, that in government, you should do things in a way that would make your grandparents proud; and every time I took a vote in local government, I thought about that mantra and I said to myself, “I’m going to do things in a way that would make my kids

proud.” And when I had to make a tough decision, that’s what I thought about. I talked to everyone, I did my homework, and then I reflected on what would make my kids proud. If it wasn’t something that would make my kids proud, I wasn’t going to vote for it. And in almost 10 years in government it has never failed me.

AF: What do you feel is the biggest challenge facing leaders today?

TT: Well, there just aren’t ever enough resources for all of the problems that we have to deal with. There’s homelessness, no affordable housing, we don’t have enough money for education, so I think that is a huge challenge that we face. How do you make good decisions when you don’t have the resources that you need? You know, everything is also just so fast. We have the benefit of obtaining information so quickly by getting everything on the internet. But at the same time, every decision that you make is getting tweeted out before you even have the chance to really research the issue. I think some people are afraid to

take a chance because people are instantly talking about what happens. But I always say that if we don't take a risk to make the community better then things will always be the same. I'd rather take a risk and fail, having tried to improve the community, than to have sat on the sidelines and done nothing, because if we do nothing, we guarantee that nothing will ever change.

AF: What is one mistake that you always see leaders making?

TT: Well I think the easy thing is for a person to think that it's about them and they get caught up in their position, or their title. We forget that it's a privilege to serve and that we've been sent to these positions, and in my case, sent to the legislature by the people of the community who are saying "We want you to go do our business." So, a lot of leaders get lost and they start to think they work for lobbyists or people with influence, instead of focusing on what they need to do to make the community better. I think that's a common mistake for leaders to make. I think a lot of leaders forget to listen and to work with others, or they let grudges get in the way. Sometimes you're going to have strong disagreements but you have to find a way to work with everyone and be a good role model because everything you do has an impact on someone else.

AF: That's definitely true. I encountered a lot of situations like that. Why is diversity important to you?

TT: My personal experience is a diverse one; my grandparents came from Jamaica and

Columbia, my mother grew up in Panama, and my father came from Michigan and his parents came from Mississippi. As a person of African American and Latino descent, diversity and embracing different traditions has always been important in my family. I just think we all do better when we embrace different traditions. It doesn't mean we all have to celebrate the same things, but we should respect the diversity of different cultures and what people celebrate to see how it all helps to add to the fabric of our community. I love that I represent a very diverse community, and that we find things to celebrate in common and can respect each other in



the places we have differences. I think that makes for a richer experience and a richer conversation.

AF: What projects do you support that focus on diversity and inclusion?

TT: When I was on the city council a lot of my work was focused on how to create business opportunities for small businesses, local business leaders, minority businesses and women in business and to open doors for those who

haven't had the opportunity to participate. There are a lot of closed doors and we've got to figure out a way to open them. I'm raising two daughters, I don't want them to be pushed out and marginalized. I know for a fact that women still earn less than what men earn and that is just wrong. We've got to figure out ways to level the playing field so that everyone has the same opportunities to participate, to compete and to live the American Dream. And I think the way we do that is to say there will

be a level playing field, allow everyone to get a great education, and make the rules the same for all businesses; not just some business person who has influence or who started with a lot of money. Make the rules the same for everyone. Anyone starting a business needs access to capital, to money and to the loans to get their business off the ground. We should be making those loans in the community, and then an education. It is so unacceptable that our higher education institutions in California have so few students of color; in some cases 3% African American; or really small percentage of Latinos or other groups and certainly very small percentages of low income kids. Education used to be free in California. We need to figure out a way to lower the cost of education so anyone who wants one can get one. We have to recognize that there is historical bias that has kept many folks from low income communities and communities of color from having a chance to get an education, so they can get a great job or launch a business. All these things will help our communities so we've got to level the playing field and move the barriers and look for opportunities to make sure everyone can get a great education, and have a great job or business opportunity.

AF: The National Association of Minority Companies' (also known as NAMCO) mission includes empowering youth, who are America's Future Leaders, and bringing

awareness to the diversity issues that shape our futures; more specifically, understanding that diversity and inclusion are critical to shareholder value; and in building and empowering institutions, communities and our next generational leaders. How important are ethical business practices to you?

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TT: I think it's very important. You have to keep the playing field level so any business can participate. Having been in local government, I know a lot of small

businesses want to do the construction business that city council or the school district does, and a lot of times they are blocked from participating because the same companies get the contracts all the time. Those same companies, that get the contracts, always bring their friends along. So if you're a small business, new business or minority business you may not be in that network and you may not get an opportunity. We have to make sure we are supporting local businesses; you want your local businesses to get supported so they can spend locally and support the local economy. It's only fair we create practices that make it easier for small businesses and make sure they get paid on time. Nothing will destroy a business than not paying them on time so they can't pay their bills and pay their payroll. When I was on the city council, we'd always organize these events where the big contractors could meet our local subcontractors to try and provide a relationship where they might work together. We increased the requirements for local participation, minority participation, and for women. We know that without those many businesses, they would not subcontract with local companies, so we said it was a requirement for local and hire and we had some of the highest percentages of local hire requirements. We want to make sure every dollar we spend is supporting

our local community as well. So I think with ethical businesses practices you create a standard, here are the rules, here's how you get the contract and then you make it fair. I've been in situations in government and you say the rule is that the lowest bidder gets the contract.

So make it that way every time. I've seen times where the lowest bidder didn't

get the contract because the other bidder was a friend of somebody who was on the government agency, and that's just wrong. Whatever the rules are, stick to those same standard of rules and don't change them to favor your friend or someone who has access. Make them uniform, make them clear and make sure they meet the needs of the agency you represent.

AF: How do you feel youth can best make their viewpoints known to legislators and corporate decision makers?

TT: I think we should invite the youth to do exactly what you're doing; to serve on youth commissions so that we have a chance to hear directly the perspective of young people, especially in education. Who better to give us the input then our most important stakeholders in education, our students? You're our consumers. So if we were in business, students are our customers and if we don't listen to our customers, that means we offer products that don't meet our customer's needs. People have choices, even in education. Students can decide to go someplace else, so we should listen to our students and give them opportunities, like the youth commission. It was great to work on starting the youth commission at the school district at West Contra Costa, but we should create as many opportunities as possible to make sure our students have a chance to give input on education policy and on what happens in the community. We should ask all stakeholders for their input whether they be students, families or seniors. And give everyone in the community the opportunity to

have their input; especially the students, because our students are the future. You're our future, we're working for you so we should really be giving you and your peers and other students the chance to lead and help shape the conversation.

“First off, I’m just thinking that those corporations that don’t embrace diversity have a faulty business model and here’s why” Thurmond

would be so much easier. I'm so glad you think that way and it's really empowering because when you have young people working together that's how you build better and it's great to hear.

TT: Well we'll work on it together and we'll figure out a way to create more avenues for access to student leaders.

AF: Both NAMCO and **DyNAMC** magazine do a terrific job at bringing attention to the issues and importantly solutions for social change in business as it relates to diversity and inclusion.

NAMCO works strategically with agencies, large corporations and organizations to level the playing field by increasing access to contracts for diverse businesses which results in street level job creation and helping to place diverse owners at leadership tables in Washington and all across our country.

We receive some resistance particularly from larger corporations that are comfortable with statements like “we already support a similar organization” or “as a large corporation, we don't do business with small minority businesses” or even worst when we bring the fact that data reporting shows some corporations do not hire and/or do business with African Americans or Native Americans etc., they become abrasive and hostile.

What advice can you give young emerging leaders to stay encouraged when encountering some of the negative

AF: That's so interesting because if everybody had your type of mindset everything



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abrasive behavior of some larger corporations who do not want to embrace diversity?

TT: First off, I'm just thinking that those corporations that don't embrace diversity have a faulty business model and here's why: if they looked at who their biggest customers are, in many cases their biggest customers are minorities. So if you're willing to take someone's money, you should be willing to also support their community, I mean that's just a basic premise that any business person should be thinking about. I would encourage young leaders to think about the power, the economic power, that they have to help those corporations hear the message they're trying to get across, and help them understand their purchasing power and to say, “We expect more around hiring, around training, around investments in our communities,” It's just as simple as that. Some of the highest incomes, and some of the highest sales, are in the technology sector, but there are some of the smallest percentages of minorities working in the technology sector. Those companies that have had those huge profits have a responsibility to do more to try and increase the ranks of people of color in the companies.

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AF: What is your position on injustice and inequality?

TT: There's a lot of injustice and we have to really work to turn that around. We all pay a price for that inequality and every time someone has a door closed in their face, we miss out on a great talent. We could have missed out on the next great designer or innovator. When you close doors for too long we see people get hurt and sometimes people make bad choices and they might end up giving up and just taking the easy way out just to survive. That puts them in the criminal justice system and now the inequality is even worse and greater, because now we are paying a lot of money to incarcerate that person, when we could have paid a little bit of money to educate that person. Then we're losing out on the potential wages they would have earned and reinvested in their community, and they would have paid their taxes and would have been able to spend time with their family. Now their family's disrupted, they're not earning any money, and their frustrated, and society as a whole is paying a bunch of money to incarcerate them. I feel

we can address inequality by being smart, make the investment up front and we're going to see a huge return on that investment down the line.

AF: We just went through a whole section in our English class about poverty and inequality, I don't know if you ever watched the film, “Inequality for All”?

TT: I've seen a little bit of it, I need to watch it.

AF: It is so amazing. When I watched it - wow it was mind blowing.

TT: Dr. Reich or Secretary Reich is working at UC Berkeley and he speaks often. Maybe we can arrange for you and your colleagues to come to one of his speeches. He constantly speaks about inequality for all and that the greatest amount of inequality exists right here in the Bay Area, where we have the greatest amount of wealth. We just have to do the work to neutralize it, to level out that playing field, and make sure everyone can earn a decent living. We all want the same things; to be healthy, happy, have a home and provide for our families. We have to figure out a way to make sure that's a priority for everyone.

AF: What inspires you to take a leadership and active role in these types of national diversity issues?

TT: I've had people helping me for my entire life and if it were not for that, I know I wouldn't be in this position. I lost my mom to cancer when I was six years old and my father was never in my life. But someone always stepped up to help me. My cousin raised me and I had great teachers and faith leaders who believed in me and pushed me and said "your life will be different than the way it started."

I've had opportunities and a lot of mentors. So, I've always believed that this is the work we need to do and that's what I want to do. I want to give back to others, I want to nurture others. I'm inspired when I see other who overcome obstacles every single day. The students I get to work with show me they've overcome obstacles, I'm inspired by that and when I see that I'm like "I have to work harder," because of what they're overcoming. Everyone had to go through something and sometimes I see people who've had to go through so much more than me, and I'm in a position to do something to help. I want to make sure I make it count and I'm very inspired by our youth. I'm inspired by people who are coming out of poverty and rising over their circumstances to say "we're going to make a better way and we don't let the odds get in their way." I think that's what I'd say to your earlier question to young people, don't let anything stand in your way. It doesn't matter how you start, it's how you finish. Find the help you need to get you where you want to be and don't give up. One thing I always believed was that education would help me in my life. I always believe that I'd have a career and I always dreamed that. I know some of our youth are just trying to survive and I think it is very important for us to create an environment where young people can actually see that they have a tomorrow, even when they're feeling like they can't see their way through today. I think that's our job to provide that for youth so they can dream. And then we can help them

figure out how to get to their dream through education, training and mentorship.

AF: What advice would you give young people who desire to get more involved in diversity issues?

TT: I would say young people should use their voices. I think people listen to youth. I think there's an opportunity

to take up the mantle of leadership. We have to always be looking to build our bench of talent that will be the next generation of leaders. For young people to start speaking up about on diversity issues give us the opportunity to support those leaders who are in training and give the youth an opportunity to be at the table. I think that young people should take up their leadership and say "We've got something to say and we want you to hear us and we've got great ideas and we think we can find solutions to these problems."

AF: What are a few resources you would recommend to emerging leaders like NAMCO Student Members and DyNAMC America Future Leaders looking to gain insight into becoming a better leader?

TT: Certainly if there is anything we can do in this office to help any young person who is interested in leadership, we're open to that. If there are internship opportunities we'd like to support that. I think that youth should seek out internships wherever they can find them, and I think we can help them find internships in a field of interest or something they'd like to try. I think just volunteering anywhere is a good thing. When I look back to the beginning, the way I got experience was through volunteerism. That's what I like about your resume. I saw you have a lot of volunteer experience and that gives you more than just a title, right? It has experience you can lean on while building your career and that matters when you're applying to colleges and to a job. They want to see a track record of what you've done. Nothing speaks to what you can do as much as what you have done. The employer

doesn't know you; they've never met you before. No one knows what you can do. When you can point to and say, I organized this campaign, I ran this committee, I supported this coalition, or I supported homeless folks at the shelter, you're showing organizational skills.

My advice for young people is to seek out internships, read everything you can get your hands on, talk to people in positions and always ask them for advice. People have a way of changing when you ask them for help. I've noticed when you ask someone for help they are always willing to offer you something. If you don't like the advice they give you, you don't have to use it, but the act of asking others for advice softens people up and they open up and they want to do more to help you. I think young people should seek out mentors, ask for advice and read everything they can

get their hands on. One thing I love to do is read the biographies of other people to see how they reached their journey and which obstacles they had to overcome. This is because I can learn things. I definitely think that young people should look for hands on experience and stick with that education and get as much as you can to move forward.

AF: I relate with that, because three years ago, me when I was a sophomore, if it wasn't for volunteering it wouldn't have brought me this far along. I would say volunteering is life and it has helped me a lot and I really like how you expressed that and service.

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TT: Well you're already doing it, look at all the great things you have done and that I know you're still going to do.

AF: A little more about yourself, what is a typical day like in the life of Assemblyman Thurmond and how do you balance your professional and social commitments?

TT: I'm still learning how to balance those commitments. Typically I'm up at about 5:00 a.m., sometimes earlier, getting ready for the day. I like to take the train to Sacramento, so on Mondays I get to Sacramento by 10:00 a.m. I usually have a meeting with a couple of groups and then at noon the entire Assembly will come together on the floor of the legislature and that's where we start to talk about bills or resolutions that have made it through a committee. I squeeze in a quick lunch, usually on the fly, and by 1:30 pm I'm usually going to my committee hearing. I Chair a Budget Sub-committee on Health and Human Services that meets twice a week, so usually on Mondays and Wednesdays I'm in my committee from 1:30 p.m. until about 5:00 p.m., hearing from hundreds of people who are concerned about the food stamp program or in-home supportive services, or something else that we need to do to strengthen the health program, Medi-Cal. So on any given day I'm in a long committee meeting, I have lots of people dropping by the office; everyone would like to have the chance to share their perspective on a bill that they want or a bill that they don't want. Every day is busy, never boring, and never dull and lots of meetings. Usually by the end of the day there are meetings and receptions and people want to meet you and talk with you or meet with you over lunch. So the days are typically long, there are lots of meetings but I love the hustle and being on the go. It's nice when you can find a little bit of time to read a little bit and do some preparation for your meetings.

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You get asked to give a lot of speeches. My favorite part of the job is always, always, always, when students come to the Capitol and I get to spend a little time with them and get to show them around or when I get to go to a school a read to the students, always my favorite part of the job.

AF: That's so cool. Can you name a person who has had a tremendous impact on you as a leader when you were younger?

TT: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I never got to meet him, but I watched all of his speeches and read many of them and I love that people in the Civil Rights Movement were willing to face violence with non-violence.

I thought that was such a powerful, courageous thing to do and it always made me think that one day I wanted to be in a position to help my community. There are so many great leaders. I got to meet Coretta Scott King. I was very impressed with her ability to carry on Dr. King's work. I've had a couple opportunities to meet

Delores Huerta and am very impressed with her history of organizing and demanding change and social justice. To this day, she has a foundation still focused on health equality, education and economics. There are so many leaders at the local level and in the community. And personal role models like my siblings; my brother and sister who had to overcome all the same challenges I did, with losing our parents, and going on to become lawyers and musicians and law enforcement professionals. I'm very proud of them and they inspire me.

AF: What do you like to do for fun and something that is surprising to people?

TT: I love movies, taking walks, and sports. I haven't seen any of that for two years because I've been campaigning for this office, so I'm looking forward to getting back to that. I would say the one thing that might surprise people about me is how much I love music.

Music has been a big part of my life. I used to sing in a gospel choir years ago and many years ago I was in a band. I'm not able to do that kind of stuff now, there's no time for rehearsal and things of that nature, but every day I have music around me. When I'm in the car I'm always with music. Any chance I get I'm surrounded by music and I love any kind of music; gospel, pop, r&b, hip-hop, old school hip-hop, classical, rock, pop, jazz, you name it, I just love hearing some kind of music.. I listen to everything. I love to have music, it is my life force. I think people will be surprised that I was in a band and I sang in a choir.

AF: So when you retire someday, what would you want your legacy to be?

TT: I want to be able to point to concrete things that we did to improve the community. I want to show that we increased graduation rates, that we increased college attendance rates, that we increased people's ability to earn a decent living, and that we decreased poverty. I want to be able to point to those kinds of things that are really concrete, so people will say that he helped to make a difference. At the end of the day, I think the most important thing I'd want anybody to say is that he really cared and that he really tried to make a difference in our community.

AF: Lastly, can you give me three words to describe Tony Thurmond?

TT: I like to think I'm funny, but I don't know that everybody else would agree with my sense of humor. I have a very dry sense of humor but I always like to make jokes because I like to see people relaxed and comfortable. I try to work hard at whatever I'm doing. I want to be the best at whatever I do and even though I feel very confident to make it up on the spot, I believe in preparation. I don't ever want to miss an opportunity so I always work hard at whatever I do. I want to always leave it all on the field. The other thing is that I'm filled with hope. I always feel that a better way is possible. I always believe that there is a solution to every problem and the day that I give up hope is the day I give up trying and I'll just walk away. So, as long as I feel a sense of hope, I feel like we can work on whatever challenges we are facing.

AF: Thank you so much, that completes our interview and I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day.

TT: Pleasure is mine, thanks for doing this and I'm wishing you luck. If I can be helpful to you in anyway, let me know. Thanks.



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