



Once Upon a Time at Fairyland

By C.J. Hirschfield



Photo by Sandrena Frischer

Colorado State Senator Mike Johnston is applauded after his speech about Great Oakland Public Schools on January 5 at the Lighthouse Community Charter School in East Oakland.

Drive, she said

On Thursday night January 5, more than 250 people sat shoulder to shoulder in a room in East Oakland's Lighthouse Community Charter School and listened to a story about car keys. By the end of the story, most of us were ready to embark on a quest to do whatever we can to make Oakland's public schools great.

The storyteller was Colorado State Senator Mike Johnston, a former teacher who co-founded New Leaders for New Schools, a national nonprofit that recruits and trains urban principals. Johnston, who looks younger than his 37 years, is a national leader in the field of student-centered education reform, an issue many of us consider the next big civil rights issue.

Which is how Johnston came to

be the keynote speaker at a sold-out fundraiser for Great Oakland Public Schools, an organization committed to ensuring that all Oakland students have the opportunity to attend quality public schools.

Johnston's story was about a woman whose role in the original civil rights movement was not familiar to any of us in the room that night. He set it up for us: The year was 1955 and Montgomery, Alabama, had started a bus boycott sparked by Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat for a white person. Organizers realized that the boycott needed to last for longer than a single day to be successful. Montgomery residents needed to refuse to ride the buses completely. But how could people get to work and home without the public transit they depended on?

After the first day, a large group gathered to figure out how to solve

the problem.

"I have a car," said a black woman named Mary Jo Smiley. She offered to lend her support to the movement by transporting boycotters to and from work and other places they needed to go. She said she figured she could help 20 people each day, and she was proud to do it.

And that's what she did.

The authorities noticed. Smiley was arrested after driving her friends and jailed for conspiracy. Boycott organizers gave her the option to stop her work for the cause. Her response?

"I need my car keys." She knew there were 20 people who wouldn't be able to make it to work, to the bank, to shop without her help.

Smiley continued driving boycotters immediately after her release from jail – day after day, for 381 days. Years later, Mary Jo Smiley – now the Rev. Mary Jo Smiley – told the *Montgomery Advertiser*: "The people of Montgomery made that boycott successful. The leaders had the strategy, but the people had the strength."

Why did Mike Johnston tell us that story in Oakland, in 2012? Because he knows that school reform won't be easy, but he's in it for the long haul. He knows that if we focus on students, effective teachers, strong leadership, individualized education, empowered school communities, choice about schools and one vision for Oakland, success will follow.

He was urging us to grab our metaphorical car keys and start driving.

For more information about Great Oakland Public Schools, visit www.gopublicschools.org.

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