

CAMCOH 5th Annual Thanksgiving Fundraiser Gala
Keynote Address
Jessica Kontchou

Thank you Mrs. Vice President for that kind introduction. It is really an honor to be up here sharing with you—it's a little intimidating—but such an honor. So I want to thank you for your gracious invitation, and also express what a pleasure it is to see so many faces here tonight. Now, you may not realize, but just by being here, just by showing up and being present, you are doing something that other people are not necessarily doing. You are representing, you are supporting, you are advancing, you are physically contributing to the future of this community, and that is something that I absolutely must acknowledge. So a round of applause to all the fine ladies and gentlemen in the room.

When I talk about your presence, it's not to flatter you. Showing up really is half the battle. Any of you who have been managers, you know what it's like when employees don't show up to the meeting. Yes, sometimes the meeting does go much faster, but then you have to send out memos, and correct misunderstandings, make up for lost productivity, and it goes on and on because people are not informed. The same is true for any of you who have worked in a group. You know the frustration of having spent hours in a meeting and going through the democratic process to come to a decision, and then three days later the guy who didn't bother to show up says, "Ugh, I don't like that idea, why did you choose that?" And you're thinking, "Really?" My philosophy is, the moment you remove yourself from the conversation, you essentially remove your right to critique. Now that's somewhat of a controversial statement, we can discuss it later, but that's not even the important part. When you remove yourself from the conversation, you remove yourself from the action. You are no longer an actor; you are a spectator. And that is a problem because life is not a spectator sport.

Everyone has a role to play in their family, in their school, in their work, in their community, and in their society. We are here, not just to raise money to build a Cameroonian cultural center. Now I know some of the board members back there are getting worried, "Wait, wait, Jessica, you're going off script!" We are not just here to raise money. Or to build a nice building. Those are physical things—very important physical things—but we are here to build a *community*. The purpose of our gathering is to create something everlasting. The bond between people with a common vision. It's the bond between people who have each other's back. People who care about their neighbor. Who are concerned with not just today, but also with the future of generations to come. That's why we're here.

"Well that's nice Jessica. I like the way you put your words together, but what does that mean?" If you just asked yourself that question, congratulations, you are part of the conversation. You are asking the right questions. What does that mean? Community? Common vision? Do we even *have* a common vision? ... I bet you we do. We may not agree on everything. But I bet you, on some fundamental issues, we do. Let's

test that. I want you all to envision the Cameroonian community you want. No barriers. No roadblocks, no. What do you want—for the Cameroonian community in Houston? What do you want for each other, fellow Cameroonians? Now you think about that and I'm going to tell you my vision and let's see if there are any points that match up.

When I think about my ideal Cameroonian community—no roadblocks, no barriers. Reality brings enough obstacles of its own for me to be limiting my imagination. One of the first things I envision is that we know each other. For me that means not only do I know what groups exist and what events they put on, but also I know the answer to questions like, where are the young professionals?, what days do the girls get together for dance workouts?, which groups host the best networking mixers?, where can I buy some *miondo*? No seriously, someone needs to answer that question for me. Where do I go if I want to know about my history? Or about what's really happening politically back home? There are people in this room who can answer these questions and I *should* know who they are. We should know each other the way we know each other back home. In Douala, don't the Hausa people live right next door to the Bamilekes in New Bell? To the point that there are Hausa people who speak Medumba better than the Bamileke neighbor! That's what it means to know each other.

Now when we know each other, in my ideal vision, we take the next step, and we support each other. That is so important. There are people in this room who have helped other Cameroonians find jobs in Houston. There are people in this room who have housed Cameroonians in this Houston. There are people who have provided free of charge, medical advice, legal advice, professional support. That's what I'm talking about. We have to help each other. There are people in this room who have organized conferences, who have sat on advisory councils, who have created investment groups, who have partnered with government officials for the benefit of their community and asked for nothing in return. And there are people who have not. And in my vision, that second group of people does not exist. Everybody does something. Everybody contributes somehow. They contribute and they contribute often. Nobody cares about what you did last year. What are you doing now?

If we commit to know each other and to truly support each other, our success will be *visible*. That is the inevitable progression of things. We will become a community that *other* people know. Wouldn't that be something? To greet someone in the United States, tell them that you come from Cameroon, and they say "Ah yes, Cameroon!" I mean I've had people with Masters degrees, PhDs, who look at me with a blank stare when I tell them I'm from Cameroon. They're just like, "Uh... Cameroo—where is that?" I mean, come on! Or at *best* I'll get, "AYYY!! Samuel Eto?" Samuel Eto cannot carry the whole of Cameroon! And it is not just the responsibility of schools to teach world geography. It is on us to do something remarkable. Because we are a remarkable people.

Now I realize that I am only 25 years old, speaking to a room of people who have far more experience than I. And I am asking you to do something remarkable. But know that I will never ask of you more than I ask of myself. It doesn't have to be magic to be remarkable. It just has to be impactful. You could change somebody's life today. Do you realize that? Are you aware of your capacity to impact the life of another human being? Maybe I'm young, but I know that where I am today is not where I will be tomorrow. I refuse to accept that where this community is today is the same place it will be tomorrow. We can't still be fundraising for a community center tomorrow. Tomorrow, we have to be staffing that center. That's the vision. Progress.

In a minute, we're going to show a video of the kids of CAMCOH talking about their vision for the community center, but before I close, let me leave you with this. My younger brother used to play football in high school, and he had a coach—one of those quintessential Texan tough guys. At the end of practice, the coach huddled his players together and told them, "You guys want to win the game? You need a plan. A goal without a plan is a wish" It's a wish. It's nothing. What is the plan?

Start small. Start today. Thank you.