

# BIGGER DREAMS

BY NATASHA A. SIMMONS  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY BRITTANY SOWACKE

**"We've become affected by limits, environment surroundings, and fears. If someone doesn't actually laugh when you say what your dream is, then your dream isn't big enough," Hill Harper said, his words echoing.**

Sylvia Reyes recited her introductory speech four times for Hill Harper's keynote address during Black History Month. Reyes, a Lawton, Okla. senior and Campus Activities Board President, paused for a minute after scrambling her words. She exhaled while leaning on the podium in the auditorium of Downing University Center. As she began speaking for the fifth time, Reyes fidgeted in her black sequin three-inch heels, but finished practicing without error.

WKU students took to Twitter with the news about the actor and author's arrival on the Hill. Waiting over an hour for the doors to open, students, faculty and community members stood in multiple lines, stretching to the end of the red-brick interior walls of DUC.

Behind the doors of the auditorium, Louisville freshman Savannah Schafer, tweeted on her phone nearly an hour before showdown, "Let's go see what this Hill Harper person has to say."

A majority of the more than 200 people in DUC's hallway gripped their cell phones and talked to friends about how fortunate they were not to have night classes or work so they could see Harper.

"Are the doors locked?" Reyes asked six event staff members monitoring the doors. Harper had already arrived, but places weren't set. Nine CAB leadership affiliates had prepared for the special occasion for five months.

As an active member of Boston's Black Folk's Theater Company, one of the nation's oldest and most respected African American traveling theater troupes, Harper studied the stage before the show. He walked back and forth on the wooden floor to the descending stairs on each side hitting the hard tile. He said he was "getting a feel of the place."

Harper said he realized he needed to help young people falling through the cracks when he received a letter from an incarcerated 16-year-old named Brian from Louisiana. Wanting to reach out to Brian, Harper found out from the warden he couldn't do much for him.

"Brian wasn't getting out anytime soon," Harper said. "He was in prison for murder and tried as an adult." His voice growing quieter as he finished his sentence.

Harper carried the yellow college-ruled paper letter in his jacket pocket. He said the letter was written at a third to fourth grade level.

"It makes me think about our education system and whether Brian failed us—or did we fail him," Harper said before he caressed his chin and raised his brow.

After reading the letter, Harper said he felt February was a time for Blacks to reflect on their blueprints for life. "I want to catch 'the Brians' and Briannas' before they fall."

Harper made his audience double their dreams and jot them in their phones or on pieces of paper.

"We've become affected by limits, environment surroundings and fears," Harper said. "If someone doesn't actually laugh when you say what your dream is, then your dream isn't big enough."

At 6:30 p.m. exactly, Reyes ordered the doors to be opened. Natalie Cole's "This Will Be (An Everlasting Love)" played when students bolted through the four-double entrance doors. Eyes locked on the best seats and purses mounted the burgundy foldable chairs saving them for their tardy friends.

Eyes gawked at the 24-foot wide by 18-foot tall high definition projection screen playing a 10-minute montage of film and television works, including the drama series *CSI: NY*, of Harper.

After the video clips, brief announcements from CAB advisers and Reyes' speech, the 45-year-old made his debut.

Dressed in all black, Harper's brown eyes widened as he quickly stepped to center stage from behind the dangling dark curtain. Hoots and hollers from the sitting and standing audience members were in a domino effect. The room had reached capacity

"I'm so happy to be here! You guys seated in the back—don't be scurred," the Harvard Law School alum said. "It's okay. You want me to come walk you on down?" Harper joked, before he jumped into his topics for the night.

Harper said he wanted the current generation to create new and innovative ideas to solve pressured problems that were present in the black community.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 72 percent of African-American children were born to unwed mothers in 2011.

Harper said his friend and former classmate President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama were role models creating a new life reality for African Americans.

"How come black men and women aren't staying together? How come there are more African American men incarcerated than in college? We can look to those two problems and see if they are related," Harper said.

Nearly five hours before the engagement on Feb. 21, Harper's tweet confirmed that he looked forward to seeing everyone at WKU. Followers had re-tweeted him 46 times by the end of the night and others asked if he would speak at their universities.

Part of the excitement of Harper's visit, according to Glasgow senior Brittany Duff was his status and positive persona for African Americans.

"I planned to be here since I'd seen the flyers in FAC [Fine Arts Center]. I feel like Hill Harper has made a big difference in African American culture and I'm glad to be here. I'm glad that he's here at Western Kentucky University," Duff said.

Her friend and Elizabethtown senior Sunetris Fullen called her twice to ensure she would come and then reserved her seat with her silver-grey handbag slouched in the center front row.

Harper emphasized not settle or "skate by" as his Harvard professor, Dr. Martin Martel, told him as a graduate student. He said he wanted black youth to reach their full potential.

"Dr. Martel told me 'well, isn't good enough, I want you to be excellent.' Harper was the author of three New York Times best selling books, "Letters to a Young Brother," "Letters to a Young Sister" and "The Conversation."

When he was diagnosed with thyroid cancer in summer 2010, Harper was inspired to write his fourth book "The Wealth Cure: Putting Money in its Place." His father, grandfather and uncle had all died from cancer.

"I rely on friends, family, and books to help me stay positive. Money is meaningless without health. I realized true wealth is a balance of physical wealth, emotional wealth, financial wealth and spiritual wealth," Harper said.

Harper's thyroid cancer was detected early and three cancerous nodes were successfully removed in July 2010. Harper said he had toured so many colleges and universities that he couldn't keep count anymore.

"When working with young people there is one essential thing. Young people, no matter who they are or where they're from, all they look for is whether you are sincere or not. When you look them in the eye and say, 'I love you, I care about you, I want you to be successful,' if they have an intuition that you are bullshitting them... then they will shut you down," Harper said.

For Harper, February was a time to be thankful for the life he had because of the adults during the Civil Rights Era.

"Because the people one generation before me actively worked to end Jim Crowe segregation, I've been able to live a life of choices and experience I wouldn't have if Jim Crowe segregation had been still in place," Harper said.

An activist of more positive social change in the black community, Harper believed it begins from within mind.

"I think we should all get up in the morning, look at ourselves in the mirror, and look at our own eyes and say, 'I'm fine,'" Harper said. "'I'm fantastic, I'm interesting, I'm necessary, I'm exceptional,' Just doing that one act to and for yourself is so much self compassion...because you are worthy."



Actor, author and mentor Hill Harper speaks to an audience in the Downing University Center as a part of Black History Month. Campus Activities Board sponsored the keynote speaker who had a passion for inspiring young African Americans to reach their full potential.