

Thank you all for that kind reception and for being here tonight.

Thanks for that kind introduction Sebastian. Tonight -- in honor of him and the Volkswagen legacy in Chattanooga, I have decided to give this speech in German.

Many people in this room work for city government. I am grateful every day for your commitment to our constituents.

Mayor Coppinger, I am lucky to work alongside you on a daily basis. You are a leader on economic development in our area, and your willingness to invest in the city is crucial for our success.

To City Council, thank you again and again. We are lucky to have such a dedicated group who advocates not only for their own districts but for the city as a whole. Our accomplishments are made possible by your leadership.

I know there are numerous other elected officials here tonight. I would like that each of you stand to be recognized for your service to our community.

I also want to thank everyone who was interviewed for our video and has participated in the program so far. From our officers that saved an infant from a burning building, to cookie and Chris -- who brighten mornings in Avondale, you are what makes our city amazing and I am honored to know you.

And to my family, I cannot thank you enough. Your support is critical to me every single day.

You have come to hear a speech about Chattanooga. After all, it's not called the State of the City address for nothing.

Some of you have come because you're friends. Some of you, let's face it, have come because you think you have to. After all, everyone in this audience is already engaged in the work that makes Chattanooga what it is, and what it is becoming. You care about our community, about the neighborhoods that sustain us, the economy that provides for us, and the civic life that stitches us together.

And so, you think you already know the state of our great city. And you certainly don't want to hear any surprises tonight from the Mayor.

Well, at the risk of surprising you, I intend to do something different tonight. I would like to introduce you to some of our neighbors. I would like you to meet Dorothy. On a recent community walk in Ridgedale, Dorothy Garner came up to an officer to say that her son had just moved away, and she felt frightened because no one could come check in on her.

What could a city, our city, do to answer her question?

I would like you to meet Gina and James.

Gina has three kids, including a newborn. She's a classroom assistant in a local public school while she works part time toward her undergraduate degree. James, the father of her newborn daughter, has always been in and out of her life. During a single conversation, he could turn from caring and concerned, to jealous and suspicious. So she refused to marry him, a source of even more arguments.

Two months ago, James came to Gina's apartment after the kids were asleep. Accusing Gina of infidelity, he pushed her against the wall and strangled her until she almost lost consciousness. A neighbor called the police, and James went to jail.

Gina is a treasured Chattanooga who works, goes to school, and takes care of her family. For her sake and the sake of her three kids, she needed to get her life back on track and headed in the right direction.

What could a city, our city, do to make the difference?

I would like you to meet Etta & Verlene.

Etta Kanipes and Verlene Middlebrooks are the president and vice president of the Glass Farms Neighborhood Association. They have lived for years near the Sunnytown Grocery, a rundown store that has hurt the entire area. It had faulty electrical wiring; the roof leaked; and it didn't keep food at the right temperature. No surprise, it was also a place where it seemed like people who gathered in the parking lot were up to no good.

So Etta and Verlene wrote the New York property owners to ask them to take action. And wrote. And wrote. But nothing happened.

What could a city, our city, do to make something happen?

And, I would like you to meet Gwen.

Gwen is a senior citizen in our city. She has owned a computer for many years, but she has no idea how to use it. That doesn't mean she lacks a story to tell and people to reach. Gwen's kids and grandkids are scattered everywhere, and she wants to be able to communicate with them. In an age where it seems like everyone is tweeting and texting and googling all the time, Gwen is a reminder: Not everyone is, and that difference can mean the world.

What can a city, our city, do to make the difference?

Our life together as a community is rewarding in many ways. Some of those ways are obvious. We share a special place in God's creation, a place of great beauty, where earth and water meet in spectacular fashion. When we call ourselves the Scenic City, it may sound like postcard pablum, but it's true. We have been given gifts that no other city has.

Still, like people, there have been great cities in beautiful places that have squandered their inheritance. We know that all too well. Once, smog choked our city's air quality, and pollution filled our river. Today, travelers from across the world marvel at our breathtaking beauty.

But the measure of our city's greatness is not just to be found in clear skies. It's in the hearts and lives of each of our citizens.

And so what do we have to say to Dorothy, to Gwen, to Etta and Verlene, to Gina and James? How are holding up our end of the municipal bargain?

Chattanooga's history is one of a community working together to confront its challenges and to direct its future. We have never been passive, letting forces beyond our control determine our fate. That is one of the most important lessons of our decades-long transformation: Even at our lowest depths, we have been able to change our story through a common commitment, vision, and determination.

That proud tradition continues today. Over the last year, on countless occasions, in ways big and small, I have seen Chattanoogaans of all stripes answer the call to improve the lives of our fellow citizens. Again and again, I have asked non-profits, businesses, churches, government, and families to break down the barriers preventing each of us from living the life of our choosing. And every time, they have responded.

It makes us special. Our city is composed of people who realize we must be about something bigger than ourselves; that our lives are better when our neighbor's is better, too; that we can accomplish more, go farther and further, when we are together than when we are apart.

So today, we take stock of the challenges we face; the remarkable way Chattanoogaans have responded over the last year; and the new hurdles we will overcome to make our families stronger, our neighborhoods safer, and our city more prosperous.

And -- because a great city protects its residents -- I begin with our progress in making our streets safer.

That starts with the hard work of our law enforcement officers. A year ago, the department was in need of a new crop of leaders.

With a citizen panel leading the way, we found our chief and our team. Chief Fred Fletcher has brought new energy and enthusiasm to the role, but by no means is he a one man band. Instead, he has inspired others to be leaders -- embracing innovative practices that will make our community safer and the Department stronger.

Everyone understands our officers risk their lives every day. But even after being Mayor for two years, I continue to be inspired and awed by the service of these brave men and women.

While our police department may be the cornerstone of our efforts, it requires a partnership with our community. Our entire force is now focused on working with residents to stop crimes before they happen and to ensure everyone feels safe in their home. That involves neighborhood watches, walks and fairs, of course; but that's not all. It also means spending time with the victims of violence, their families, and the innocent bystanders affected.

It means helping senior citizens who often feel alone despite being surrounded by neighbors.

And that brings us back to Dorothy.

Now, a member of the CPD goes to check on her faithfully -- just to make sure she's ok. That makes Dorothy safer -- but it makes her whole street safer too. People sometimes ask me "what is community policing?" Ladies and gentleman - that is community policing.

Our law enforcement officers now see their job as solving problems for people. On a Saturday afternoon, they volunteer to paint over graffiti. When someone calls the police because he can't hang his drapes, our officers don't arrest or scold him. They pull out their night sticks and bang the drapes into place. (I'm looking at you, Officer Condra)

And when someone loses a loved one to a crime beyond our comprehension, they help pay for the funeral.

This empathy -- understanding the conditions that give rise to public safety concerns in the first place -- helps us form a common bond against those who destroy our neighborhoods with their senseless violence. It says “We are in it with you. We will not again be the community that watches the 11 o’clock news and merely asks ‘isn’t that awful?’.

Our officers do all this because it's the right thing to do. But we also do it because, in the daily effort to make our a city a better place to live, we make more progress when we're all in it together.

And it's not just the Police Department, either. Our Fire Department has adopted a more proactive, community focus than ever before. While they have always done a great and courageous job, this year our firefighters analyzed where fires were occurring and went door to door, giving people tips about how to prevent a blaze from starting. By taking city services to the door step, we create meaningful interactions that lead to deeper relationships and better results.

We have seen the difference when we gain the trust of those we serve. When I first came into office, it seemed like no one ever gave us intelligence we could act on. Now, though, slowly but surely, we get important tips and information.

It's reflected in the numbers. Over the year that our Violence Reduction Initiative has been in place, we have seen our shootings decrease. From October to March, our gang gun violence dropped 24 percent. We know there's more to do. But with a relentless police department, and an even more engaged community, we will continue to face this tough problem head on.

Just as we have taken on the scourge of gang violence, we must now confront what's driving over 30% of our violent crimes -- domestic violence and sexual assault.

If you look at the reports of crime in our city, it doesn't take long to see a pattern emerge. A pattern that points to the sheer number of crimes of violence within a family and among people who know each other.

Which brings us back to Gina.

It's for Gina - and so many others - that we launched the Family Justice Center.

Domestic violence victims face terror everyday. They know their own home is not safe for their family, but instead a place of fear, intimidation, and control. When victims do come forward, instead of finding a guide who helps them piece their lives back together, they are often met with a complex map of services they struggle to navigate.

The Family Justice Center is a one stop shop where they can go for safety, justice, and support. Already, 11 different partners have agreed to provide services on site, with even more helping off premises.

Today, Gina meets with advocates at the Family Justice Center, who help her fill out a personal safety plan. They go to court with her so she doesn't feel intimidated by James. They even helped her family leave their old apartment building so they could feel comfortable in a new place James knows nothing about.

Working together, refusing to let this awful event define her life, I know Gina will finish that degree and look for the job of her choice right here in Chattanooga.

But working with Gina is only half the solution.

People who commit these intimate forms of violence, people like James, should be taken off our streets. That's one reason why, under Chief Fletcher's leadership, the Chattanooga Police Department has created a sex crimes unit specifically to investigate and prosecute sexual assaults.

It will also help us to confront the growing problem -- not just here, but nationally -- of sexual assaults on college campuses.

Here's what we know from national data. College-age women are about 3 times more likely to be a sexual assault victim than women of any other age. And one in four college women report they have been the victim of a rape or an attempted rape in their lifetime.

All of us here tonight have kids, grandkids, or friends who have worked hard to attend a university, looking ahead to a bright future. Our children should be able to go to college without living in fear of their classmates.

And we should make it clear that our commitment to public safety does not end at the gates of the university.

Chancellor Steve Angle gets the urgency and need for change. For so many reasons we are lucky to have him in our community. He has pushed through policy changes to help protect the thousands of young people who attend UTC, but there's more to do.

So today I am pleased to announce the city and the University are entering a community compact to address sexual assault on campus.

First, our police department will coordinate closer than ever before with campus police to bring offenders to justice.

Second, our Family Justice Center will work with the university to provide more awareness, increased reporting, and stronger support for victims.

Chattanooga can and should be a model for cities across the country struggling to make campuses a safe place for all young men and women. UTC students are Chattanoogaans with a limitless horizon. They are my constituents. They are our neighbors and we have a responsibility to keep them safe.

We know that making our community safer strengthens neighborhoods. The idea of a great place to live is clear in our minds. Kids are playing in the yard. Neighbors are talking to each other. Yards are mowed. And people don't worry about the house crumbling down next door.

That's the city all of us want.

But it's not the city all of us have. When we work together though, we can change the place we live, making daily life better for all of our neighbors.

And that brings us back to Etta and Verlene.

Last September our Fire Department, law enforcement, and Department of Economic and Community Development went out to East Chattanooga to look at the store. Our Fire Marshal shut it down, and the daily nuisance for so many area residents was gone.

And now, a local business person bought the property and is opening up a new grocery store.

That's why we listen to the everyday problems of Chattanooga and take action -- tearing down the silos that prevent government from finding comprehensive solutions.

And it's why we train 62 citizens, many of them here tonight, through our Neighborhood University, empowering them to take control of their own community, just like Etta and Verlene.

Across city government, we work with Chattanoogaans to make their streets a better place to call home.

Our community development specialists now partner with Public Works employees to demolish blighted, abandoned houses. The Department of Transportation helps connect people to jobs, neighborhoods, and opportunity through smart investments in infrastructure. Despite the increasing costs of construction and materials, we paved miles of road, built over 5,000 feet of new sidewalk and patched over 11,000 potholes over the last year.

And being a pedestrian or a biker in our City is becoming safer each day. With a new partnership between the police department and City Transportation, we continue to win state and national recognition for our efforts.

Verlene and Etta should never have to accept that a business on their block is unsafe and unhealthy, hurting their neighborhood. They didn't accept that as fact, and now East Chattanooga is the better for it.

There's a lesson there.

Much like them, none of us should accept that, tonight, in our city, there are Chattanoogaans without a home.

Families. People who work. Many of whom have served our Country honorably.

Last year, I set a goal of eradicating homelessness among our veterans by the end of 2016. I asked for your help in assisting those who have sacrificed much for the good of us all. Churches, non-profits, landlords, and dozens of individuals have answered the call.

After lots of hard work with help from our partners many of whom are here tonight, in the last few months we have housed 24 veterans.

With 80 on our list, we still have a ways to go. But just two weeks ago we got 25 new volunteers. Those are 25 Chattanoogaans who realize each of these veterans has an amazing story and knows that -- together -- we can make their next chapters happier and healthier.

We have housed those veterans by harnessing the talents and passions of individual Chattanoogaans. To have a thriving City, we must capitalize on all of our assets, and unleash the potential of everyone in our community.

That's why I am excited to announce the creation of the Mayor's Council for Women. The inaugural Council will be chaired by the only female City Council person -- Dr. Carol Berz -- and the only female member of our State Delegation to the General Assembly -- JoAnne Favors.

Using an economic lens, they will examine issues that adversely affect women in our community and make policy recommendations to the City. It is critical that we stand together as a community -- united to empower and embolden women of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities.

Of course, our greatest source of untapped potential is our youth.

In the last five years, around 10,000 children have been born to Chattanooga families. Their stories are largely unwritten. It would be easy to resist responsibility for the success of these young Chattanoogaans, to believe that their educational outcomes are already set by their circumstance, to wish them good luck and hope for the best. But we understand that our city's future is bound up in theirs, and that we will build a better city -- today and tomorrow -- by ensuring they have an opportunity to succeed.

A month ago, I visited Woodmore Elementary. The principal, Ms. Grant, said many kids enter kindergarten at Woodmore with a 400 word vocabulary. She also pointed out that the average American kindergartener knows 4000 words.

It's tough to expect a 5 year old to play catch up alone. As a community, though, we can shrink that gap together.

That starts even before a child is born. With the opening of Baby University through a partnership with Signal Centers, we will help parents make better decisions about the discipline, health, and first learning experiences of their newborns.

We are also expanding our early learning once those children reach the classroom. Because we received a grant of \$2.1 million dollars -- the highest in the state -- we have added 150 kids to our Head Start classrooms, all to make sure more kids are ready to learn on day one of school.

More kids with access to Head Start is always good. But higher quality learning for each of those kids is even better. And sometimes it doesn't take a lot of money to make a big difference.

Last summer our Youth and Family Development Administrator, Coach Lurone Jennings, decided to look into enriching the quality of education in our Head Start classrooms. Well, it turns out -- shockingly -- that Head Start is heavily regulated. And our high score comes in part from obeying all those regulations. Regulations like washing kids' hands after they paint, before they eat snack, after they eat snack, before lunch, after lunch . . . You get the picture. A lot of hand washing.

Coach saw teachers forced to spend a large part of their day walking out of the classroom, down the hall, and then back. We determined we could add about an hour and a half of instruction daily if we invested \$8000 to put a sink in every classroom.

That's right. An hour and a half a day. For \$8,000.

I'm not going to lie, I think that if I had told Coach we didn't have the money, he would have told the teachers to break the rules if it meant more time learning. But we did have the money, and I can't imagine a better return on \$8000.

We aren't limiting our efforts to those kids who haven't yet reached school. Today, more than four thousand kids are actively participating in our Youth and Family Development Department's reading initiative all around the city. And fifty percent of those young people are reading at or above grade level.

We are also helping to ensure they have every opportunity as they move into adulthood. Because we know kids who fill out the financial aid form are more likely to go to college, we funded a FAFSA completion initiative. Last year I watched as Howard students typed out their forms with the help of an advisor, smiling as I asked each one to tell me their hopes and dreams for the next stage of their lives. In all, 341 students got one step closer to college because we helped them fill out this complicated form.

Early learning. Literacy. College Education. A great city invests in its young people and makes sure no talent goes to waste. While we aren't there yet, we hope to strengthen our efforts every year to build a stronger Chattanooga for decades to come.

But a focus on the future doesn't mean we have neglected our opportunities today. In fact, our economic picture is bright in a way which would have seemed unimaginable just a few short years ago.

In March 2013, when I was elected, our unemployment rate was 7.8 percent. Today, we are down to 6.5 percent. Even our foreclosure rate, a sign of resiliency among our most vulnerable, is at its lowest level in 10 years.

Our economy is on the right track.

For too long we clung to an old two-tiered, smokestack economy.

Now, an innovation economy in which anyone with a great idea and hard work can succeed is reshaping the City. Chattanooga is seen by the rest of the world as ahead of the pack. Over the last year, our creative, entrepreneurial businesses have grown.

Companies like Bellhops, Feetz, and OpenTable are enhancing our thriving small business community and adding critical jobs to our area.

So let me introduce you to a couple of other guys. Adam Boeselager and Nick Macco started Southtree in their dorm room. The younger among you may not realize this, but there was actually a day a long, long time ago, like 2006, when we couldn't take video on our phones. We used to have things called camcorders, VHS, beta, and hang on for this.. film.

I know it sounds barbaric. But trust me kids, it's true.

So Southtree takes those old reel to reels and videotapes we old people own and digitizes them. At the beginning, of course, everyone expected a DVD or thumb drive. Now, their customers want their videos to be uploaded to the cloud, and they ask for a password to distribute to their friends and family to share in the joy.

Because we live in a city with the fastest internet in the world, Southtree can upload those videos in a higher resolution, with sharper images, than any of their competitors. And in just a few short years, Adam and Nick have moved out of that dorm room and into our downtown.

And it isn't just the two of them anymore either. Right now they are packed to the gills with 107 employees.

We have to continue to nurture these high growth companies. Gone forever are the days of silos and smokestacks.

Today's entrepreneurs want and need a densely populated, highly caffeinated city, with collision points everywhere providing regular feedback for those trying to invent new products. Our innovation district is central to that strategy.

The Edney Building, now owned by a team of local developers who are dedicated to Chattanooga's success, will be the cornerstone of our Innovation District and our new economy, with CoLab and the Enterprise Center as anchor tenants. It will connect entrepreneurs with creatives and existing businesses to ramp up our next successful companies.

Still, not every company is a start-up.

It is hard to imagine a better day than last July, when I got to join Mayor Copping, Governor Haslam and others in announcing 2,000 new jobs at Volkswagen. And it's not just in manufacturing, either.

Now, VW is also trusting Chattanooga to design the automobile of the future. All in all, 2,000 families' lives will be changed forever, as their position at Volkswagen gives them that great American ticket to the middle class.

We will have even more opportunities as the supplier base expands. Companies like Plastic OMNIUM, Gestamp, and others will have thousands of openings over the next few years.

I want those jobs to go to Chattanooga first. That's why today, I am happy to announce VW and the City have joined forces again - this time to launch a task force to help Chattanooga be more prepared for employment at our automotive companies.

We know these jobs are coming. We must break down the barriers that keep local residents in every neighborhood from taking advantage of those opportunities.

This need to unlock the talents of all Chattanoogaans -- to make sure they each dictate the terms of the life they want to lead -- is the next challenge all of us face together. An auto workforce pipeline is one part of the solution. Our recent announcement of TechHire, where we match the IT needs of companies with the talents of Chattanoogaans to build a bridge to the middle class, is another. But in the long run, we must also make sure as many citizens as possible have access to Chattanooga's game changing infrastructure: our high speed broadband network.

Chattanooga has the fastest, cheapest, most pervasive internet in the Western Hemisphere, 600 square miles of fiber optic cable hooked up to every home and business in the area. Thanks to the far-thinking leadership of Harold Depriest and the entire team at EPB, we have a municipal asset at our disposal that is the envy of every mayor I meet.

Unfortunately, we also know not everyone uses the technology that literally comes to their front door. Some people can't afford it; others don't know what to do with it.

We are a community that comes together to break down these barriers. So through a partnership with Hamilton County and the Benwood Foundation, the Enterprise Center created Tech Goes Home. It teaches senior citizens and parents of young kids how to use a computer safely and practically, from paying your bills to sending an email.

And that brings us back to Gwen.

A few weeks ago, I went to a Tech Goes Home class at Second Missionary Baptist Church. There were around 20 seniors sitting in an activity room, staring at their new Google Chromebook computers. Each of them was presenting their homework, a chance to show off what they had learned so far. Gwen explained to the class how she googled an upcoming speaker at her church and created a flyer to invite friends to the event. At the end of her explanation of how she did it, everyone in the class clapped and cheered.

I bet Gwen felt great when she handed out those flyers to everyone she knew. And I bet more people went to see the speaker at her church -- a message that could change their lives forever.

We can't leave behind great Chattanoogaans who simply want to worship together, to learn together, and to celebrate together -- and need an internet hookup to help them do so.

To use the web, of course, you have to have a live connection to it. With the world looking at us, we must lead in access to the internet, making our network affordable for as many people as possible. I know EPB agrees.

Today, alongside EPB, I am pleased to announce the creation of the Netbridge Student Discount program. Any family of a child eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch in schools can receive 100 megabits per second internet at a cost of \$26.99 per month.

Think about it. Our low income families will have a faster connection than Park Avenue millionaires at a fraction of the cost.

That's the mark of a community that solves problems.

All this builds a city with innovation at every level. Whether it is the entrepreneurs in our Innovation District, or the kids in every neighborhood doing a science experiment on the internet, we seek creativity and insight at every corner of our city.

But we don't do this alone. Most of us think of technology as solitary, as sitting by ourselves, staring at a screen, using it to create a world apart from everyone else.

That isn't it at all, though. We are at our best when we use technology to create community. Gwen didn't learn how to use a computer to shut the world out. She did it to make a flyer for a speaker at her church. Adam Boeselager and Nick Macco didn't start Southtree just so people could send in their videos. They knew their customers would want to share those memories, enabling friends and family to watch those cherished moments together.

These are our Chattanooga values. Non-profits. Civic leaders. Private Industry. Government. All of us come together to help each individual have the chance at writing their own story, building community in the process.

After all, Chattanoogaans have never believed our destiny is fixed. When Walter Cronkite called us the dirtiest city in America, we didn't accept our fate; we cleaned our air and water, and now Outdoor Magazine calls us "Best Town Ever." When people and businesses fled downtown in the 1970s and 80s, we didn't fold up our tent; we spent time rebuilding our urban core, investing in a waterfront now recognized as one of the best in the country. And when manufacturing left our city for overseas, we didn't give up; we recruited one of the most famous brands in the world to our city, adding middle class jobs for thousands of Chattanoogaans.

Our city works together, building a place to raise our kids, start businesses, and live the life of our choosing. We certainly have our problems. But we don't shy away from them, and know our best days come when we address them together.

The state of our city is strong. It will only get stronger in the years to come. And it will be because we are different, because we work together, because we value each of our individual stories and how they come together to make a community.

That's why Chattanooga is the greatest mid-sized city in America.

Thank you.