



Memphis is on cusp of greatness, says colorful ex-coach Digger Phelps

By James Dowd

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Digger Phelps shows off his moves to "Walking the Dog" by Soulsville Charter School students during a reception at the Stax Museum of American Soul Music on Thursday. Phelps was the keynote speaker Friday at the Lipscomb and Pitts Breakfast Club.

Let it be said, first and foremost, that Richard "Digger" Phelps, former University of Notre Dame men's basketball coach who's now an [ESPN](#) analyst, believes in Memphis.

Believes, as in convinced that the city's potential is as mighty as the Mississippi River that serves as its front door.
Want proof?

Phelps pointed to commitments by several companies to relocate here, a historic run by the Grizzlies and a visit by President Barack Obama to Booker T. Washington High School as but a few examples that the city is experiencing a cultural, economic and social renaissance. He challenged and charmed a crowd of some 400 business leaders on Friday as keynote speaker at the [Lipscomb & Pitts Breakfast Club](#).

"As we look at history and as we look at change, to me Memphis has always been the gateway to the South," Phelps said. "Speaking as an outsider, you don't know the power you have here. I love coming here because of who you are and what you believe in, and I think you're poised to be the gateway not just of the South, but of the United States."

But to do that, Phelps said Memphians must work hand-in-hand to address societal ills and provide stronger educational opportunities for young people.

"If we can save kids, then I'm not worried about families. They'll be OK," Phelps said. "You've got to come together as a team in Memphis and realize you're a sleeping giant. Giving your money is fine, but you've also got to give of yourself and mentor these children. When people give the excuse that they don't have time to volunteer at least an hour a week to mentor a kid, I say, 'Oh, really? Well guess what? Skip lunch one day if that's what it takes. Make the time.' "

The pep talk resonated with [University of Memphis](#) men's basketball coach Josh Pastner, who has known Phelps for years and appreciated the blunt observations.

"He's got an amazing ability to inspire people, from his players to community leaders because he practices what he preaches," Pastner said. "His message about mentoring should be a challenge to all of us to get involved and make this a better community."

Phelps offered a similar message on Thursday when he spoke to students, musicians and community leaders at the Soulsville Charter School and the [Stax Museum](#).

"His suggestion for getting actively involved in the lives of our young people is the most important investment we can make in Memphis," said Kirk Whalum, CEO of the [Soulsville Foundation](#). "Think what an amazing impact we could have by giving a little bit of our time."

True to form, the colorful sports figure -- whose shtick includes coordinating his neckties with similarly colored highlighter markers during broadcasts -- offered some of his time while displaying his timing at the Stax Museum.

Holding court at a reception that featured a performance of "Walking the Dog," Phelps broke out into an impromptu dance and put his own stamp on the Rufus Thomas classic.

"Digger walked the dog in Memphis," Phelps said. "How much fun is that?"

-- James Dowd