Thank you all for being here. I would like to begin with a note of clarification. My good friend Michael Mandelker who is here today asked me last week, “So, why would you name something after your son Marc?” He said that it was his wife Cheryl’s question, but I really think it was his. I replied that this whole dedication was about my brother Marc David Chernoff who died almost 33 years ago. I proceeded to tell him that my son’s name is Marc Spencer Chernoff; he was named for my brother. Michael then asked me who is honored by my son’s middle name. I said my father. Incredulous, Michael asked again, in his quintessential New York accent, “Your father’s name was Spencer?” I told him that the name my father actually used was...
Solomon and that he grew up in East New York, a tough neighborhoood in New York City. I told him that if my father had kept the name Spencer, he would have gotten the crap beat out of him every day of his childhood.

...In addition to the people I just acknowledged, there are two others who are our most esteemed guests this afternoon. First, my big sister Nadine—“Deenie” to those of us that love her. She taught our parents how to parent so as it make it a little bit easier for my brother Marc and me to forge our way in this world. While she is diminutive in physical stature, she is one of the strongest people I have ever known. She has dealt with one tragedy after another in her life without letting the unknown forces that cause such events get the best of her.

...And there is my son, Marc Chernoff. By the way, he hates his middle name. My life is bracketed by two momentous occasions, both involving the Marc’s in my life. First, there was the most difficult episode of my life, the death of my brother in October, 1974. Then there was the most joyous day of my life, another October day—this one in 1990: the birth of my son. He is a constant challenge for me and a constant joy. When we took him home from the hospital two days after his birth, I wondered what kind of child this small bundle would turn out to be and what kind of man he would eventually become. Having been a close witness to my brother’s mistakes in life, my recurrent fear was that he would make some wrong turn that I could not prevent. But I am happy to say that he is developing into a fine young man with the right values. I am as proud of him as a father can be.

My brother Marc was just 15 months older than me. For most of our childhood, I looked up to him and cherished his attention although some of that attention was unwelcome as, in my memory, we fought almost every day of our childhood, and I was almost always on the losing end. He was smart and good looking and funny and adventuresome and I wanted to be just like him. So I dressed like him, combed my hair in a pompadour like him, and desperately wanted to be as bold as him.

But around the time that we reached our mid-teens, my brother took a path in life that just seemed to me to be the wrong direction. He began to do poorly in school and his adventurous nature often got him in trouble. By the time he was 15, he was experimenting with drugs and ultimately became addicted to heroin by the time he was 17. Why? I’ve asked the question a million times and know that I will never reach a definitive answer.

...He was deeply haunted by demons that I will never understand. He struggled with so many aspects of his life throughout his young adulthood and died when he was 24 years old of a drug overdose. I miss him terribly and think about him every day. I think about what he might have become had he stayed on the right path. Unfortunately, my ruminations are all futile speculation, because he is gone from this earth, but happily, he is not gone from our hearts.

When, unimaginably, the 30th anniversary of Marc’s death was looming on the horizon, I decided that I wanted to commemorate his life in some positive way. I was already involved here at the DNA Learning Center and thought about how strongly I believe in science education for children. I and the rest of the Corporate Advisory Board decided that we would help pay off the deficit still remaining on this building by offering our benefactors naming opportunities. While I have never been interested in affixing my name to charitable gifts that I have made, I seized the opportunity to name the most prominent room in the DNA Learning Center.

In a New York Times editorial, Nicholas Kristof wrote, “Congress contains 218 lawyers, but only 12 doctors and 3 biologists. In this century, one of the most complex choices we will make will be to determine what tinkering to allow with human genes to ‘improve’ the human species. How can our leaders decide that issue if they barely understand what DNA is?”

As my response to that question, I offer the following DNA Learning Center mission statement that we approved four years ago: “The mission of the Dolan DNA Learning Center is to prepare students and families to thrive in the gene age. We envision a day when all elementary students are exposed to principles of genetics and disease risk; when all high school students have the opportunity to do hands-on experiments with DNA; and when all families have access to genetic information they need to make informed health care choices.”

Increasingly, computers are used to sift through the huge amount of data generated by genetics research around the world. Bioinformatics—a combination of biology and computer informatics—is the field that helps makes sense of all of that data. The Bioinformatics Laboratory that we are dedicating today will facilitate the education of students in this important new field.

I am happy to honor my brother Marc’s memory with this Bioinformatics Laboratory. It is my hope that a child visiting here someday will be inspired to become the next Jim Watson or the next Bruce Stillman so as to continue our efforts to understand how we can use our knowledge of genetics to prevent and cure diseases. Moreover, without programs such as those offered by this center, our children will simply not be able to compete in science.

As part of his school’s activities, my son Marc has visited the DNA Learning Center several times. Perhaps he will be back here again with his class before he finishes high school. In any event, he knows today that his namesake is permanently honored here. What I wish for my son is a life that his uncle did not have the opportunity to enjoy—a long life of good health, lots of happiness, respect and compassion for everyone, and a drive to be productive, both for his own gratification and the enrichment of those that surround him.

I thank you for being here and I thank you all for sharing this important event with me.