

New England Council on Opportunity in Education

Senator Claiborne Pell Award

April 11, 2013

This is a totally unexpected honor. I suppose if you live long enough, your past has a way of catching up with you. Since we have just started a new baseball season, I can confess that I have lived most of my life with a different attitude. I followed the advice of that great American philosopher and late arriving major leaguer, Satchel Paige, who when asked about the past would say, "[Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you.](#)

So this is quite a surprise. My thanks to the New England Council of Opportunity in Education for creating this award. I would also like to acknowledge my wife Liz, here tonight and her continued support that made this award possible. And I would personally like to thank my friend and Brother Mitch, or since I'm speaking in more formal New England, Dr. Arnold Mitchum. Without his prodigious efforts there would be no Upward Bound and no Trio program.

And to share this honor with Sargent Shriver and Ted Kennedy, two great Americans with whom I had special opportunities to work with---well that makes your award even more special to me. Senator Kennedy, as I'm sure most of you know, had a close relationship with Senator Pell. The Kennedy and Pell families were closely connected. Pell was first elected to the Senate in 1960 when JFK was elected President.

At Senator Pell's funeral, Ted Kennedy gave one of his last public speeches describing his own close relationship where they served

together in the U.S. Senate for 34 years. Senator Kennedy described Senator Pell's great legislative achievements: the Pell grants that have aided more than 115 million students, The National Endowment for the Arts, The National Endowment for the Humanities, the international seabed treaty that banned nuclear testing on the ocean floor. And then Senator Kennedy closed with these words, "It was Claiborne Pell who was an environmentalist long before that was cool. Claiborne Pell was a Senator of high character, great decency, and fundamental honesty and that is why he became the longest serving senator in Rhode Island history. He was a senator for our time and for all time. He was an original. He was my friend and I will miss him very much".

And that is why all of you here do me such honor with this award in his name.

In many ways this is like a homecoming for me. I was born in Roxbury and grew up in Dorchester. Went to Boston schools, including Boston Latin School, where I had one of my early teaching experiences. As some of you may know BLS was a tough love school, 3 hours of homework every night and as incoming 7th graders we were all seated in what seemed at the time to be a massive auditorium and told by the Head Master to look on either side because one of us was not going to graduate. He was right.

I was not a model student at BLS and had what in those days might have been called "a troubled history". But I survived, went on to college and graduate school and somehow found myself in Washington in the early 1960's working for two Presidential Committees; The President's Committee on Youth Employment, and under Attorney General Robert Kennedy's direction, The President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency. Later people would ask me at how, at such a young age, I could have had such positions. My answer was that I could speak

Boston."What did that mean?", they would ask and I told them that speaking Boston meant that you never let the other person finish a sentence.

My experience with the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency was probably the greatest influence on me at the time. While I was working for Bobby Kennedy I was also Co-Chair of Washington CORE, at times getting arrested on the weekends and then coming into work the next Monday morning with my name in the newspaper. Kennedy was aware of my split level life and never discouraged me from my civil rights work.

My job at the President's Committee was to overview the education programs of the first of the community action agencies that we created: Mobilization for Youth in the lower East Side of NYC Center for Progress Inc. in New Haven, ABCD in Boston. At times I was asked to help develop new programs in Chicago or Providence. (tell the stories)/(the Providence School Board)

At times, I would travel with RFK. Once we were in Harlem. We had just mediated a very difficult agreement between an organization controlled by Adam Clayton Powell , then the Chair of the House Labor and Education Committee and Dr. Kenneth Clark , probably the most respected African American educator of his time. The merged organization was called Haryou-Act.

Whenever we visited, the Attorney General wanted to meet some of the young participants. So we did, out on the street, Bobby Kennedy talking to a small group that eagerly formed around him. But there was one boy who stood apart from the rest, distant, seemingly disengaged. Kennedy saw this and after his brief meeting ,sought out the youngster and the two of them walked down the block and sat on the curb together

for several minutes. None of us knew what was said nor did anyone ask. It was just a single moment in a difficult day. Nor was it unusual.

Bobby Kennedy was drawn to these “outsider” kids”. And I suppose as a self-viewed “outsider” kid I was drawn to him as well.

In the Fall of 1963, I was asked, (really told), by the Attorney General to join the newly established task force on poverty. He wanted to be sure that the experience of the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency would carry over into the War on Poverty, particularly the Community Action Program. My involvement would soon lead to my participation in the beginnings of Head Start and Upward Bound. Programs that have managed to survive numerous onslaughts to this day. Perhaps the greatest challenge to Upward Bound and the War on Poverty came when Richard Nixon was elected.

It has been useful for me and hopefully for many of you as well to recall how Upward Bound began as an anti poverty program. We don't hear too much these days about the poor. A casual reader of our press from far away could conclude that the poor are no longer with us. The major political objective of both political parties seems to be the survival and growth of the middle class: by different compositions of reducing taxes for some and retaining or in some ways, increasing federal expenditures for others.

Poverty is an afterthought if it is a topic of any consideration at all. Our current frame of reference is our deficit and how to deal with it. For many currently in power there is too little thought of how we came to where we are and who should be held accountable.

Recently, President Obama in his second Inaugural Address used soaring language to reaffirm America's commitment to the dream of equality of opportunity:

“We are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else, because she is an American; she is free, and she is equal, not just in the eyes of God but also in our own.”

His words echoed President Johnson’s first State of the Union address, nearly 50 years ago and only 6 weeks after the assassination of President Kennedy when he unexpectedly said,

"This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America."

This was the true beginnings of Upward Bound, the TRIO program, and the War on Poverty. It was borne out of the greatest national tragedy of our lifetimes and the greatest popular uprising of our generation, the civil rights movement. This is your heritage. And you must never forget it and always pass it down to those who follow you.

The struggle to extend human rights and economic opportunity is never ending. The power of privilege and exclusion is ever present. The conditions of our fellow citizens of low and even middle income have worsened in the last dozen years. The current stock market rises have meant nothing for the stockless, who continue to struggle with high rates of unemployment and poor job prospects.

Today between the idea and the reality falls the shadow of our failed hopes misplaced priorities. Today, the United States has less equality of opportunity than almost any other advanced industrial country.

At the start of the millennium, we had a record surplus and we were poised to continue the expansion of economic opportunity to the less fortunate among us. But as an after effect of the narrowest and most contested presidential election of our lifetime, it was all blown away.

From September 2001 until September 2008, President Bush seemed to have nearly unrestricted freedom to pursue his expansive goals. To fund his war on terror, Congress gave the administration all the money it wanted. Huge bipartisan majorities appropriated hundreds of billions of dollars, producing massive federal deficits and pushing the national debt from roughly \$6 trillion in 2001 to just shy of \$10 trillion at the end of the second Bush term in office.

Even liberal Democrats who declared their opposition to the war voted again and again to approve the military budget, joining with conservative Republicans who abandoned their principles of fiscal responsibility and lowering the deficit. After all, Vice President Cheney had assured the country that deficits didn't matter.

So we began the decade with a fraudulent and futile search for weapons of mass destruction and we ended the decade with a futile and fraudulent search for budgets of mass reductions.

Today, the key issues for both political parties are debt and deficit. This is now the central focus, not the poor, not the kid on the street. If there are any additional funds for education, the focus in the U.S Department of Education has been on "The Race to the Top", in my view a misguided attempt to quick fix our nation's schools with an unproven admixture of charter schools, renegotiated teacher contracts, merit pay, standardized test rated performance and occasionally voucher programs.

All of this is promoted actively by private foundations and private capital. And all of this is unproven by any validated research. And this is happening when as many as 5,000 more kids could have been in Upward Bound in the last 4 years. Yes, the Administration and the Congress have supported the Pell grant program, but they have not expanded and supported Upward Bound and TRIO at the same time. This is like

provided a ladder for the street kid with strong rungs at the top and broken rungs at the bottom. Nobody can race to the top that way.

And beware of the low cost, quick fix, simple solution. Just look at these recent headlines about a Stanford University study:

- The Chronicle of Higher Education "A Low-Cost Way to Expand the Horizons of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students,"
- The New York Times, "A Simple Way to Send Poor Kids to Top Colleges,"
- "New tools help smart low-income kids realize great college opportunities, Stanford researcher says," news.stanford.edu, March 29, 2013.

Who needs Upward Bound and Trio?

Just encourage our elite Colleges and Universities to better target high achieving low income students with information and financial aid. Thomas Jefferson had a phrase for this, he called it “Raking the rubble”, the elite finding the elite among the poor. But meritocracy is not a substitute for democracy.

America’s poverty rate is now at its highest level in two generations. Contrary to the American Dream of broad-based upward mobility, the United States ranks 10th out 12 OECD countries in social mobility. In addition, our country has the highest proportion of low-wage workers of any developed country — people who work hard but earn less than \$10.50 an hour and are barely able to make ends meet.

With growing poverty and the narrowing of economic opportunity, what then are the prospects that our educational system can become the great equalizer?

After World War II, we made a major effort to democratize our education systems with the G.I. Bill, which extended higher education to

Americans across the economic spectrum. Can we do it again? Looking across a rather pitiful political landscape it doesn't look likely.

Let's take a moment and look briefly at the future of higher education. I can make the case today that higher education as we have known it is disappearing. The Tidal wave of advancing information technology that has swept aside the record store, the book store, and eventually the movie theater, newspapers and magazines, will change the very structure and meaning of a university education.

And this tidal wave is coming to a college or a university near you. Last month DOE approved Southern New Hampshire University for federal aid for measured competency in addition to credit hours. It does not require a great leap of imagination to see the potential impact on Upward Bound and TRIO and the students you all serve.

Non elite colleges and universities will be pressed to offer more on-line courses and give advantage to those students most familiar with on-line learning. Will this be the outsider kid sitting on the curb down the block? Is he or she or their parents likely to assume the enormous student debt that could drive them into bankruptcy in their retirement years?

And what does this mean for programs like TRIO and Upward Bound? Will they survive 5 years from now, 10 years from now? I hope that some in this hall are thinking about how to redesign our programs in an age when distance learning and diminishing budgets will rule the day.

If you believe that Upward Bound and TRIO have continuing and sustaining value, you must go beyond your campuses and reach out to the thousands who have gained so much from these programs and engage them directly to support the efforts that provided the essential support of their lives.

We all have drunk from wells we did not dig. It's time to dig new wells. It's time to dig into that aquifer of hope and opportunity that lies under the American character. It is time to organize.

The Upward Bound and TRIO programs will not survive without massive new and sustained support.

And where can the massive support that we will need to survive come from? It can come from those who have gained the most from what you have had to offer, the Upward Bound and Trio graduates. Reach out and touch them through the powerful social networking tools that are yours to use. And don't complicate it. You don't need to create the mirror image of a typical college alumni organization with annual membership dues and continuing fund raising appeals.

Make it easy. Create networks where people can reach each other and not necessarily through you. Let people tell their stories as I have told you some of my story tonight. There is power in our stories, the stories that have changed us and changed the time we live in.

Change in my life and in the society that surrounded me has never been constant. It has come in fits and starts. The civil rights movement, the war on poverty, the rapid growth and contraction of our public school system, were all dramatic examples of change in my lifetime. Some of this change I welcomed and had the good fortune to be a participant. Other changes I witnessed with regret.

I believe that we are losing the public nature of our society and that we are devolving into an existence where privatization is the ruling ethic. Our public schools, or as Horace Mann termed them, our "Common Schools", where students from all sectors of our society came together in a common experience are becoming schools of choice and self selection.

Our military, once supported by a universal draft, has become volunteer only and supported by private mercenaries in ever increasing numbers. Many of our roads and even our prisons are increasingly operated by for-profit corporations. Our common natural resources, our water, our forests, our seashores; all have become objects of profit.

As Robert Kennedy once said, for "Too much and too long, we seem to have surrendered community excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things."

The privatization of our public sector is significantly helping to foster the selfishness and greed that has so characterized our recent history. We cannot be a great society without standing on a public common ground that holds us all together.

Listen America

Listen America , can you hear the footfalls of the next billion of us,
Crossing the boundaries of cyberspace without a bus,

Seeking minimum wages and flat screen TV's,
McDonald Big Mac's and little Fiat Minis.
And all of this while our national product of simplistic political conflict
Remains gross.

Listen America

Our education system can no longer be higher,
Held together with band aids and wire
Claiming a curriculum composed at the core,
Of myth and mendacity,
And not much more.

Listen America

The Mercator maps on our walls that project our minds
Into a multicolored display that surely finds
All nation states with stable exports and a firm border,
It is not real,

All is in disorder,
These place mats of permanency no longer exist.

Listen America

Our world's wealth is held firmly,
By the world's fortunate few,
Who now fly to anywhere there is habitation secure,
And pliant political authority without any clue,
Of the riches well hidden from taxes that are due.
They do not want our cyber world to reach out and touch them.

Listen America

How many of these fortunes can claim a past
Free of corruption, free of exploitation
And yes free of slavery? Are they free at last?
How can we trust their trust funds?

Listen America

Your planet home

Is not yours alone

A fossil fuel claimed from the past

Is not supposed to last

Look to the Sun

And feel the wind near

Wake up to your future

And all you hold dear.

Listen America

Stan Salett

April 2013