WOMEN’S HISTORY SPEECH

FOR

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• CHARACTER • COURAGE • COMMITMENT •

Ladies, gentlemen, family, friends, distinguished guests and honored colleagues, thank you all so much for joining us today as we celebrate Women’s History Month and the women selected as this year’s honorees. I am thankful to be given the honor to speak in front of all of you today, but the truth is, our honorees’ reputations and contributions to our world speak volumes on their own. Each woman, in her own way, traveled her own journey, and embodies this year’s theme: Character, Courage, Commitment, and there is so much to learn from the actions, determination, and resilience demonstrated by these inspiring leaders. Dr. Timothy Leary, who many considered a maverick and somewhat of a loose cannon-but a very wise one at that, had this to say about the subject: “Women who seek to be equal with men lack ambition.” You know what? Think about it… the world really wouldn’t get too far without us! (**Wait for the laugh**).

Women traditionally took the submissive role in history and culture, but slowly yet surely, we learned that behind every great man…. was a woman nurturing, prompting, encouraging and challenging the status quo, and eventually, all learned to be proud of her accomplishments. Even in today’s global economic, political and sociological arena, although women have made encouraging strides to demand that their voices be heard, and worthwhile comments and viewpoint be considered, we still face resistance and hesitation from male dominated segments of society.

A strong, determined resilient woman, Eleanor Roosevelt, had this to say on the topic. She said, “A woman is like a teabag. You can’t tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water.” Trust me-this year’s honorees have been steeped and brewed and challenged, and we as a society are that much better off to have the privilege of sipping the nectar of their ceaseless efforts.

The women we recognize and acknowledge for this year’s Women’s History celebration are a diverse group. They come from all walks of life, they’re of varied socioeconomic, ethnic and religious backgrounds, they each faced unique sets of challenges, yet I believe, and I think you would agree, that each one teaches us that every challenge and rejection made them stronger and more determined to accomplish their goals in life no matter how impossible each one might have seemed at the time. As I tell you a little bit about some of these magnificent women, think of how her contribution paved the way for YOU. Think about the path that was blazed because of their tireless focus. In some cases it may be difficult as many of these achievements blend into the contemporary vernacular, but make no mistake about it. We would not be here today without them and each one made a tremendous difference in the world in which we live today.

Chipeta was a Native American woman who eventually became known as the Queen of the Utes. Although the term was considered derogatory when first coined, she demonstrated her strength, wisdom and will to survive from a very young age, in fact she was discovered as a baby on a battlefield, the lone survivor of a massacre. She was adopted by the Utes and grew up as part of that tribe. She became close with Ouray, the Chief of the tribe, and married him, always maintaining his ear and offering the wisdom of peaceful co-existence with the white man. She was in fact, the only woman permitted to sit on the Ute tribal councils. She lived from 1843 to 1924 and when we think of all that she accomplished back then, she must have been a truly astounding woman.

Anna Julia Haywood Cooper may have been born into slavery around 1858, but her curiosity, thirst for knowledge and passion for education was an inspiration to everyone that knew her. Her mother may have been an illiterate slave, but Hannah Stanley Haywood wholeheartedly supported her daughter’s quest for knowledge. Incredibly, she began her undergraduate career at Oberlin College on a scholarship, and her skills in liberal arts and mathematics continued to distinguish her academic career. She eventually began writing and publishing scholarly works that gave her tremendous popularity on the lecture circuit. She spoke about “Intellectual Progress of Colored Women since the Emancipation in Chicago at the World’s Congress of Representative Women in Chicago in 1893. She traveled abroad to places like London to deliver her message, and is credited with being one of the founders of the Colored Women’s YWCA as well as the Colored YMCA. Cooper went on to work on her doctorate at Columbia University in NY, but her studies were curtailed for a time. Her half-brother had passed away leaving five small grandchildren uncared for. Cooper adopted all of them and made sure they were taken care of. In 1925 she earned her PhD, making her only the fourth African American woman to have that distinction. She was an educator, humanitarian and an early pioneer of African American feminism. Her contribution to our world is inestimable.

How many of us are old enough to remember the importance for a woman to be able to go to a “Katie Gibbs” school? Although it may seem somewhat anachronistic now, Katherine Gibbs paved the way for millions of young women to enter the work force as secretaries, stenographers, and executive assistants at a time when few women even considered a formal education or career training. In an article about Mrs. Gibbs from 1986, we learn, “Her students, young women of ‘background and intelligence,’ were graduates of every top school in the northeast…Mrs. Gibbs stressed that her school’s practical training would insure self-reliance for young women providing them with the independence that comes with the knowledge that each woman could support herself.” In this day and age, we may tend to take that independence for granted. Let’s face it-most of us in today have to work to survive. But the roots of self-sufficiency for women began somewhere, and we all owe a tremendous debt to Katherine Gibbs and her vision for all women to be educated and financially self-sufficient.

There are many other brave and determined women that we are privileged to acknowledge this year. In her piece entitled, “From the Intellect of Woman,” written in 1893, Agatha Tiegel Hanson teaches us, “Civilization is too far advanced not to acknowledge the justice of woman’s cause. She herself is too strongly impelled by a noble hunger for something better than she has known, too highly inspired by the vista of the glorious future, not to rise with determination and might and move on till all barriers crumble and fall.” Hanson was born of hearing parents, but she was deaf. She married a deaf man, architect Olof Hanson and had three hearing daughters. She was the first woman to graduate from the National Deaf Mute College and went on to become an editor, poet and advocate for deaf people. She was a feminist who did not allow circumstance to limit her impact in the world.

That’s something we can say about all of this year’s honorees-Circumstances and challenges did not limit or diminish their belief in themselves or their causes. Roxcy O’Neal Bolton has tirelessly advocated for women’s rights. She is the founder of Florida’s first hospital based rape treatment center and she also established that state’s first battered women’s shelter. She founded a shelter for homeless women, worked to form Florida’s chapter of the National Organization of Women, and even lobbied the national Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to name hurricanes after men and not only women… after all, why should women be the only ones to get the bad rap from a heavy storm??? (**Wait for the laugh**). She was an ardent feminist who was at the vanguard of promoting and advocating for many improvements in women’s lives. Arden Eversmeyer founded the Old Lesbian Herstory Project. Eversmeyer believes that everyone has a valuable story and her mission is to chronicle those stories of older lesbians who have seen their share of challenges and discrimination.

There are others like Frances Oldham Kelsey, a pharmacologist and public health activist, who, in her work in the FDA, refused to approve Thalidomide. Some of you may be saying, “What’s that?” I’ll tell you. It was a drug taken by pregnant women for morning sickness and it caused unspeakable birth defects. Kelsey saw the dangers and stood her ground-to the point where today, most people don’t even know what that drug is. About Frances Oldham Kelsey, Daniel Carpenter, Professor of Government at Harvard, has said, “She had a huge effect on science that we all take for granted today.”

Women like Carmen Delgado Votaw, Ann Lewis, Jaida Im, Tammy Duckworth, and Lisa Taylor have also made indelible contributions in the fields of women’s history, government, human trafficking, and the military.

Each year, the month of March is dedicated to Women’s History. It’s an important time for all of us as we look back on and celebrate the women of extreme courage and compassion who devoted their lives to the betterment of ours. With such demonstrations of CHARACTER, COURAGE and COMMITMENT, we owe it to each one of this year’s honorees to live our lives authentically and with purpose as we teach those younger than us what it means to be a woman of quality and integrity. Thank you.