**EVENT SPEECH**

**FOR**

**VICKY McGHEE**

Hello everyone and thank you for this opportunity to speak with all of you tonight. I want to express further thanks to Gregory Jones for organizing this wonderful event, and for inviting me here to experience and share all of this empowerment. Imagine me, Vicky McGhee, a native of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, speaking to all of you!!! The theme of tonight’s presentation is Phenomenal Woman, and I will do whatever I can to support women... especially in my hometown.... and **ESPECIALLY** if they’re **PHENOMENAL**... and these women are!! I also have to say that I counted over **THIRTY** women who are being recognized tonight, all from communities in and around Johnstown. I must say I find that heartening... gratifying... and **EXTRAORDINARY**. So often in life, and especially lately, the tendency to be overwhelmed by tedious, negative, unpleasant, counterproductive issues and news is way too prevalent. I applaud Gregory, the women being honored, and all of **YOU** for going against the stagnant tide and for finding the good and positive in life to celebrate. We all have a part in the heritage and history of this city and it’s communities. Most or all of us were raised here, live or lived here, found our friends and nurtured our families here... we learned to dream here... we found our strength here, and tonight, we bow our heads to Johnstown, Pennsylvania and its gift of encouraging the phenomenal from all of us... no matter the circumstances. That is something worth acknowledging and celebrating.

I was born here in Johnstown. I was raised here. I went to school here, and yes. In 1989, I left. This is a small town that encouraged **BIG** dreams... at least in little Vicky McGhee (**If you’re married, use your maiden name**) of (**Name the street you lived on**) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Street. I chose a military career and I have served in the US Army (**Is this correct? Please advise**) for \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ years. That included a tour in Afghanistan... that experience **REALLY** taught me, but if I have to say so myself, it was my upbringing right here in Johnstown that prepared me and showed me the way. It trained me to survive some really harsh conditions and experiences..... after all, I **SURVIVED WINTER IN JOHNSTOWN**!!! (**Wait for the laugh**). Maybe we should put that on tee shirts and sell them as souvenirs at (**Name the main local or department store where souvenirs might be sold**) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Come to think of it, we should probably make heavy fleece sweatshirts with that saying... tee shirts will **NEVER** keep out the cold during the winter out here!!! I have **A LOT** of memories of Johnstown....most of which involve freezing my pants off in the winter chill!!! But that all contributed to making me strong and resilient.

The work I do in the military... the assignments I accept and complete, the tasks I share, the bond I feel towards my squad and colleagues, all stem from my upbringing right here. As I said, living in this community provided a foundation and showed me the way. I learned right from wrong. I cultivated a sense of purpose. I studied and learned my lessons .... whether I wanted to or not.... as I attended (**Name the schools you went to .... public, grammar, high school**) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. (**Please think of 3 incidents from childhood that you learned... if possible, one from each school and I will add them**). Each phase of my youth taught me well.... of course I didn’t think so at the time, but I can see, looking back, that each event added to my history. When I was \_\_\_\_\_ years old, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ . As I got older, I will never forget, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and then in high school, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

As I thought about what I wanted to share with you tonight, I thought about the women and girls that **I think** are phenomenal.... **in addition** to tonight’s honorees, **of course**!! I don’t think any of them came from distinguished childhoods or great wealth or superior circumstances. I think we are all phenomenal within... you know, like the saying goes, “She was a legend in her **OWN MIND**?” (**Wait for the laugh**).... only instead of dwelling on being a legend, these women saw a missing piece, injustice, inequality... and did what was needed to right a wrong or advocate for others.

“The key to realizing a dream is to focus not on success but in significance- and then even the small steps and little victories along your path will take on greater meaning.” Those words were expressed by Oprah Winfrey, someone that I think is a truly phenomenal, extraordinary woman. I think by now we have heard the story of Oprah’s early, troubled life.... she grew up in a rural farming community in Mississippi. She was abused by a number of male relatives and friends of her mother. By all accounts, on paper, if we wrote down the circumstances of her childhood, we would probably have not foreseen the incredible success and impact this phenomenal woman would have had on this world, our country, and even how we view ourselves and our own lives. She found her voice and discovered her significance and she shared it.... with **ALL** of us. Her generosity of ideas, compassion, and empowerment are legendary, and I believe she is directly responsible for our own ability to find the opportunities to celebrate each other.... even right here in Johnstown.

Someone else who “stirs the pot” of inspiration and enlightenment is a young woman who refused to die or be intimidated in order to gain an education. Malala Yousafzai is the young Pakistani woman, who, at the tender age of **FIFTEEN**, defied the **TALIBAN** in order to secure young girls’ rights to attend school. **WHO DOES THAT**? In a country in which women are largely considered second class citizens, where girls don’t matter enough to deserve to be taught, she **REFUSED** to back down. The Taliban issued a death threat against her... which probably betrayed their **OWN** fears, and in the process of her fight against illiteracy, she was shot in the head. She miraculously survived and at seventeen, wound up becoming the youngest person in history to win the Nobel Peace Prize. In 2013, the United Nations even proclaimed July 12TH, her birthday, as Malala Day in recognition of the speech she was to present that day. Keep in mind that even as young as **eleven years old**, she was an advocate for education. At that age she gave a talk entitled, “How Dare the Taliban Take Away my Basic Right to Education?”

Another phenomenal woman that inspires me every day is our former First Lady, Michelle Obama. As a lawyer and writer, as a graduate... with honors from Princeton University as well as from Harvard Law School, our First Lady consistently demonstrates intelligence, integrity, and grace in just about everything she does. She wisely reminds us, “You may not always have a comfortable life and you will not always be able to solve all of the world’s problems at once, but don’t ever underestimate the importance you can have because history has shown us that courage can be contagious and hope can take on a life of its own.”

Phenomenal women are borne from courage and grit... persistence and compassion... personal truth and resilience. **ANYONE** has what it takes to be extraordinary... in her own way... we just have to be true to our own personal mission in life.

Someone else who is almost definitely unknown to most, if not all of you, is a woman named Melvinia Shields. I see you’re looking kind of puzzled, so I will explain. It’s believed that she was born a slave in 1844 in South Carolina. At the age of **eight** years old, she was sold to the Shields family for $475.00 and she was moved to Georgia. Through a series of events... you can put two and two together, she had a son named Dolphus Shields who married a woman named Alice. Alice, by the way, is Michelle Obama’s great-great grandmother. Is there anything more extraordinary... or **PHENOMENAL** than connecting just **FIVE** generations and tracing them from a little slave girl to the First Lady of the United States? Today, a monument stands in Melvinia’s honor that states on its headstone, in bold proud letters, “This memorial marks the grave of Melvinia “Mattie” Shields McGruder. She was born a slave in South Carolina in 1844. At age 8 she was brought to the Shields Farm near what is now Rex Clayton County, Georgia. In the late 19th century, she moved to Kingston to be near her people. Her family would endure a five- generation journey that began in oppression and would lead her descendent to become the FIRST LADY of the United States, Michelle Obama. Melvinia’s story is one of HOPE.”

All of our stories and all of the journeys of tonight’s honorees are personal, unique, and inspiring. I think the important thing to take away from this presentation is that we must pay attention, support our friends and relatives in finding and expressing the light and the specialness within each one of us. And while we do that, let’s acknowledge the home town from which we either hail or live.... Johnstown. As we explore our own histories and passions, it’s important that we don’t take this home city for granted.... and while it’s true that these streets and roads have seen better days, it’s important to understand that life really is a circle... that heritage means something in the grand scheme of life, and that legacy is richest when it is shared. There were many nights when I was deployed that I thought of life back here in Johnstown... in many ways it was simpler.... cozier.... and yes... much **MUCH COLDER**... (**Wait for the laugh**), but **THIS** is the environment that contributed to make me who I am today.