

# KEYNOTE ADDRESS

## Women's Power Breakfast Fundraiser for Gleaners food bank

Detroit Westin Book Cadillac Hotel  
March 11, 2009



Good morning, gentlewomen, and gentlemen.

I am honored to have been asked to speak this morning to the Detroit Women's Power Breakfast. Frankly, power intimidates me. Maybe because I've never had it. I much prefer Power's quiet cousin, Influence, who can go home earlier and at whose desk the buck never stops.

But in this room this morning I sense the aroma of both power and influence. I smells like long hours, late hours, headaches and heartaches, like 8 a.m. meetings and remembering names and keeping do-do lists. But it also smells like change, like spring.

Have you heard what the comic Roseanne Barr said? "One thing women need to learn is that nobody is going to give you power. You have to **JUST TAKE IT.**"

Whether you took it or won it or found it on the sidewalk, you're powerful today, and I applaud you. Your faces encourage me and remind me what I loved about my work: the ability to talk to people, heart-to-heart.

What an exhilarating and frightening time it is! Everybody said 9/11 would forever change everything. But, oddly, that seems like nothing compared to today.

The good news is that we have as a nation broken the sound barrier: We will never again see a presidential race comprised of all old white men.

The bad news is, well, I don't have to tell you. All the institutions we trusted to take care of things -- our banks, our brokers, our political and economic leaders, our media -- have failed us.

Yep, you know it. Everybody we looked up to, as if we were children and they were adults, none of those adults knows how to fix this.

And so here we are: deprived of trust, deprived of money, many of us deprived of the future we imagined. We have nothing left but the basics.

We are being reminded how good the basics are.

FRIENDS. They remind us where we've been and that we don't pass through this life unnoticed. Friends are the ones who not only listen to you, but remember what you tell them.

FAMILY. Even if our family members aren't our friends, they remind the ones who've known us longest, who wander the same streets in their night dreams. We also build non-genetic families of friends we knit into our lives, leaning on them and inviting them to lean on us.

LOVE. It is a deep and blessed thing. And unlike our 401Ks, the more love we spend, the more we have left to spend. On cold nights when the world seems like it's going to hell, a warm partner in bed is a treasure. We feel safe.

KIDS. Grandkids. New life, new hope, new possibilities! In a couple days we'll be with our granddaughter, who is 4 years old and who is, I believe, the happiest person in America, with not a worry in the world.

FOOD. We don't need extra-virgin first cold pressed olive oil after all, or prime cuts of anything. Mac and cheese does the job. Toss in a few scraps of Italian sausage or Polish kielbasa some jalapenos. Or you know, that magic ingredient, bacon. It doesn't get any better than that.

Did you notice that these basics are all short words? Kids. Food. Friends. And there are other easy-to-spell words that apply to these times: Keep. Fix. Patch. Make do – all words so simple that they must have been the first grunts human beings made as they learned to communicate with each other through language.

Making do. I just finished a wonderful book about making do. It's called "Ice Bound," by Jerri Nielson, the woman doctor who a few years ago discovered she had breast cancer while stationed at the South Pole. She had to diagnose herself and treat herself with chemo for several months until a rescue plane could get in without its fuel turning to jello in the 100-below-zero temperatures.

She describes so well the make-do spirit of the South Pole, where plastic baggies are used and reused, even taped together, Where residents pay through trash like scavenging seabirds to find things they might reuse. She found ripped-up flannel sheets somebody had tossed and sewed them into covers for the pillows in her medical clinic.

But she also learned to make-do with the people she had – 40 other men and women, locked in together for the winter, nobody ever new at the party. One evening at dinner, the South Pole green house, whose production was spotty, managed to harvest enough lettuce to give each diner two small leafs. Three of the doctor's friends donated their lettuce to her until she had a tiny salad, a precious thing.

"It was," she wrote, "one of the best gifts of my life."

What we give to each other in our poverty makes us rich. Last week I was about to throw away an old pair of comfy blue light-weight sweats. They are badly faded and two seams had split.

Then I remembered my mother, teaching me how to sew. Sewing is no big deal. Darning socks is no big deal. But who among us does that stuff anymore?

So I sat myself in a sunny spot in my kitchen and thought about her. She's been gone almost 8 years, and I was glad I can think about her now without tears. And, I felt grateful for my thread and my needle – a simple tool as old as humankind – and thankful for my mother's lessons, and for my kitchen, my chair and the sunshine.

I've read, in a place as august as the Wall Street Journal, that gratitude is making a comeback. People are complaining less to their brokers, and report being happier with their jobs, perhaps because they still have one. In these tough times people who used to complain about what was missing in their lives have instead begun to notice what remains.

It reminds me of one of my favorite quotes: "Happiness doesn't lead to gratitude. Gratitude leads to happiness."

I want to introduce you to a few women I met in the past couple years when I was traveling around Michigan on a project we called "Tell Susan Ager Where to Go." Each of them, like people you know, help us see what is important, and teach us lessons about life.

GLORIA SCHMIDT. Her farmer, a dairy farmer, shot and killed himself in their garage a couple years ago on Mother's Day. For a long time after, she felt so crazed and distraught she was afraid to even seek therapy. "I was scared," she told me, "that they would lock me up and put me away."



She has since repainted their home, started volunteering at the hospital, is helping build a log chapel in her husband's memory and continues to look out her big kitchen window at the sky and the land they loved.

The lesson: Don't let life defeat you.

BETTY CHAVIS. Betty grew up in and loves Detroit. But she accepted a job 600 miles north of Detroit, at Michigan Technological University in Houghton, as its first minority recruiter. The school had 17 black students. She had learned to love the place and dramatically improved its complexion. That cap she's wearing is very popular in the UP, called a Stormy Kromer.

How does she recruit so many kids from Detroit? She told me, "You can't lie to em about winter. You can't promise em global warming. I show them pictures of snow banks over my head, and I'm no shorty."



"And I say that probably the first two days you're here, you'll feel sick because you're breathing fresh air for a change."

Then I tell 'em, aw, just try something different in your life."

It worked for her. The lesson: Change can stretch you into a new and better person, terrifying as it may be.

**JULIE BAUER:** Julie was 23, with a degree in social work and an apartment in San Francisco, on the brink of flying to the Philippines for a stint in the Peace Corps. When the phone rang it was news from her mother: Julie's father had killed himself.

In an instant her future exploded. She returned to little Jonesville, Michigan. She went back to work at the ice cream stand where she'd worked in high school.

She made do. She dug in. She worked hard. And she saved her money.

Now she and her husband own the Udder Spot, which they built with a half a million dollar loan. It's the most popular ice cream place for 100 miles. She works 270 days straight, from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. They let their teenage employees write on the walls, and every year they take the gang to an exotic spot as a thank you, to New York City or Toronto.



One 17-year-old employee told me she knew it was “a once-in-a-lifetime job” and said she had learned from Julie to “live life to the fullest. Take risks. Be responsible. And be on time.”

Basics, hey?

Even Julie writes on the wall. Above the drive-thru window she penned in black Sharpie: “Always say thank you, even if you don’t mean it.”

The lesson: Do what you need to do, what you must do. But do it better. Bloom where you’re planted.

CARRIE HADLER is 24, a Brown University graduate living in a cheap flat near the old Tiger Stadium, sleeping on a futon she dragged in from the sideway, with no car, no TV, no microwave and no desire for them.

After a stint volunteering in Africa she came home ashamed of American affluence, and launched a campaign to get school supplies to a refuge camp in Ghana. She showed a Power Point about Ghana to school kids, and asked them to bring in their spare extra pens, notebooks, staplers, stuff they might have thrown away or stuffed in a drawer.

She gathered more than 500 pounds of stuff and found a way to ship it to Africa.



She calls it doing what she could. I call it power.

The lesson: “Even I can make a difference.”

LORRAINE GARCIA-McGLYNN has worn this POW bracelet from the Vietnam War for more than 25 years. On it is the name Marshall Kipina, who was shot down over Laos when he was 21 years old.



“It’s part of my arm,” she told me. “I can’t just throw it in a drawer.” She has wondered for decades about his story, and asked if I could help, and I found what’s left of his family in tiny Calumet, in the UP.

Nobody’s sure what happened to Marshall, whose mother left when he was 2, and whose father died young. He went to fight, and never came back. One researcher thinks he was alive for years in a POW camp. No body was returned to Calumet. No service was held. But the town put a stone for him in its cemetery. It is tended, and his memory is kept alive, by his closest living relative, Cecelia Nardi, who adored her older cousin.



She was 14 when he was killed. She couldn't believe someone still wears a bracelet with his name on it, and asked me to thank Lorraine for remembering.

The lesson: We are immortal in the memories of others.

JILL SKLAR lives with Chron's disease, which means when she needs to go, she needs to go. Public bathrooms were denied to her so many times, with unpleasant consequences, that she decided there ought to be a law. It took her scores of letters and phone calls, hours of testimony about her private health issues and six fully years to get that law passed. But she did it, this past fall, after I wrote about her campaign.



Now no clerk can legally say to any of us, “Sorry, our bathroom is private.”

The lesson: Laws are made, and changed, by people like you and me.

SHANNON WILTSE was born without legs or arms as we know them, and couldn't figure out why no guy she liked would go out with her. At home she scoots around on her butt. In public and at her job as a genetic consultant, she uses a motorized scooter. She has only one finger, whose nail she paints bright red, and with which she is able to type remarkably fast.



She went on her first date when she was 37 years old, with a New York State man she met on the Internet. They emailed and talked by phone for months before meeting face-to-face. "We got to know each other," she says, "from the inside out." That, they agree, made all the difference.



She is 8 months pregnant now, due April 12 with Noah, their first child.

The lesson: Everything that counts is on the inside of us.

Oh, and this is me and my granddaughter, Katie Leigh Coppard, who I was sure you'd want to see a picture of. I'm teaching her to stick out her tongue.



She is what this is all about. This is a girl I want to see grow up with gratitude. She is a woman of tomorrow who I hope and pray will grow up not necessarily with ease, but with self-esteem and purpose. I hope she wants to literally and figuratively plant trees, to leave behind work that gives a weary world shade.

Every time I hear somebody say to her, “You are so pretty,” I add in a loud voice, “Katie, you are also strong and smart.”

Thirty years from now I want her to remember that she is beautiful within, and doesn't need to worry about her face or the color of her hair or the style of her shoes, that none of those is as important as the light of her character.

I want her to remember that she is strong, and doesn't need a partner who abuses or shortchanges her. I want her to stand on her own, or chose a partner who enlarges her world and her heart.

I want her to grow up not just smart but sensitive and wise. I want her to become a nurturer of other people, even if she chooses not to become a mother.

And I want her to grow up confident that when she sees something in the world that's not right or just or good, she can change it.

Gentlewomen of Detroit, we all have a Katie Leigh or two or three in our lives. And like her, we are all beautiful and smart and strong, even though we may not believe it all the time.

But we are these little girls' role models. And this sea change in America, this crisis of confidence and hope, calls for the best from us.

You have gathered here to support the work of an extraordinary organization that feeds the hungry. It's really nothing but a group of smart, strong, tireless and creative people with a well-defined mission, who've joined their small hands to get big things done.

Joining hands. That's key.

Today, everywhere we look, everybody is hungry, hungry for hope and searching for safety.

You don't find those things on the curb, though, where Carrie found her futon. You find them only in each other.

We can feel and shelter each other. If you don't regularly have folks over, try it. I once read that when you have people for dinner the only room you need to clean is the bathroom, because that's the only time they'll be alone to study the corners for grime. I wish we shared more meals, turned off our TVs, talked to one another. I think we can get through these troubled times on the wings of words.

I believe we will get to know each other better in this mess, reminding each other of the basics, as human tribes did for centuries. We can sew buttons for each other. Bake bread for each other. Sing songs to one another.

And yes, we can raise hell together to change the world, on this block, in this neighborhood, on this planet.

Rabbi Harold Kushner has written that the meaning of life is encapsulated in one simple verse from the Old Testament's Book of Ecclesiastes:

"Eat your bread with gladness, and drink your wine with joy."

Basics.

And gratitude.

This meal, this day.

Thank you for your invitation today, and for the attention you've given me.