

THESE VITAL SPEECHES

THE BEST OF THE 2026 CICERO SPEECHWRITING AWARDS

GRAND AWARD

- 3 "Testing Limits," by Charles Crawford for Robert Floyd, Executive Secretary, Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation

CATEGORY WINNERS

- 7 AGRICULTURE: "Florida Is Where AI Comes to Feed the World," by Chris Moran for Scott Angle, Senior Vice President for Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Florida
- 8 ASSOCIATIONS: "Healers and Warriors," by Jeffrey Crooks for Dr. Bobby Mukkamala, President, American Medical Association
- 10 EDUCATORS: "The State of Harvard Medical School: Resilience, Transformation, and Our Enduring Legacy," by Allison Eck for Dr. George Q. Daley, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Harvard University
- 16 ENERGY: "Re-Defining the Global Energy Transition," by Stewart Price for Amin Nasser, President and CEO, Saudi Aramco
- 18 INSURANCE: "Movement Is Medicine: Why Health Insurance Must Cover Exercise," written and delivered by Monique Fuentes, Student, Modesto Junior College
- 20 MILITARY: "Why We All Need a Battalion of Pigeons," by Michel Reinders for David van Weel, Minister of Justice and Security of the Netherlands
- 21 NONPROFIT: "Wellspring Living Overview+Vision Speech," by Chitara Ellis for Christian Murphy, CEO, Wellspring Living
- 24 CONTROVERSIAL OR HIGHLY POLITICIZED TOPICS: "The Last Legal Form of Slavery," written and delivered by Cecily Mundo, Student, Modesto Junior College
- 26 DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION: "It's Time for the 'Reference Man' to Retire," by Johan Kroes for Elanor Boekholt-O'Sullivan, Minister for Housing and Spatial Planning of the Netherlands
- 27 ECONOMICS: "r* in the Monetary Policy Universe: Navigational Star or Dark Matter?" by André Schmidt for Dr. Joachim Nagel, President of the Deutsche Bundesbank
- 30 ENVIRONMENT/ENERGY/SUSTAINABILITY: "From Reaction to Readiness: Firetech and the Future of Wildfire Response," by Nicole Lowenbraun for Sonia Kastner, CEO, Pano AI
- 32 FUTURE OF THE WORKPLACE: "Why Being a 'Good Listener' at Work Isn't Enough," by Maegan Stephens, VP Comms, Duarte, and Nicole Lowenbrau, Marketing and Program Director, Duarte
- 35 HEALTHCARE: "The Simple Way AI Can Make You Healthier," by Francisco Mahfuz and Brian Miller for Elena Ikononovska, CEO and Co-Founder, Diadia Health
- 37 LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT: "Who Is My Neighbor? A Call to Serve on the Road Ahead," by Jackson Wessells for Angela F. Williams, President and CEO, United Way Worldwide
- 39 PHILOSOPHY AND/OR RELIGION: "Darkness and Light—National Hanukkah Celebration," by Ferry Piekart for Mariëlle Paul, Netherlands Minister of Social Affairs and Employment
- 40 RHETORIC AND COMMUNICATION: "The Magic of Message: How to Talk Less, Say More, and Magically Connect with Anyone," written and delivered by Brian Miller, Messaging Consultant, Clarity Up Consulting
- 40 SOCIAL JUSTICE: "How to Keep Our Kids Safe From Hidden Dangers," by Francisco Mahfuz and Brian Miller for Ashley Hill, Founder, Magdalena's Daughters
- 42 TECHNOLOGY: "The Ability Hand: The Future of Prosthetics," written and delivered by JoAnna Noon, Student, Modesto Junior College
- 44 AWARD ACCEPTANCE: "2025 RMS Evening of Excellence Awards Remarks," by Marie Lewis for Stephanie C. Hill, President, Lockheed Martin Rotary and Mission Systems
- 46 CAMPAIGN SPEECH: "A Commonwealth United," by Beau Cribbs for Abigail Spanberger, Governor-Elect, Virginia
- 48 COMMEMORATIVE SPEECH: "Making Your Choice," written and delivered by Charles Crawford, Father
- 49 COMMENCEMENT/CONVOCAION ADDRESS: "Ikigai: Find Your Reason for Being," by Kaine Korzekwa, for Dr. Nita Ahuja, Dean, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health
- 51 DEDICATION/GROUNDBREAKING CEREMONY SPEECH: "A Roll Call of the Righteous: Rededicating Historic Memorial Coliseum," by Tiana Thé for Eli Capilouto, President, University of Kentucky
- 53 EMPLOYEE MEETING: "The Heart of the Matter," by Trish Hendrix and John Curry for John Curry, Managing Partner, New York Life
- 58 EULOGY/TRIBUTE SPEECH: "The Meekness of True Strength," written and delivered by Joe Myers
- 60 INAUGURAL SPEECH: "What Our Patients Deserve," by Jeffrey Crooks for Dr. Bobby Mukkamala, President, American Medical Association
- 63 MOTIVATIONAL SPEECH: "Beware of Her," written and delivered by Kyle Murtagh, Presentation Skills Trainer, Confidence By Design
- 65 STATE-OF-THE-INSTITUTION SPEECH: "Ever Forward, Evergreen," by Mike Faulk for Jay Inslee, Outgoing Governor, Washington State
- 68 TED TALK/TEDX TALK: "The Art of Being Persuaded," written and delivered by Jens Kjeldsen, Professor, University of Bergen

SEE HONORABLE MENTIONS, INSIDE FRONT COVER

HONORABLE MENTION

“Opening Bolivia to the World,” by Nabilia Lopez Rivero for Jean Pierre Antelo, President, Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CAINCO)

“Beyond the Stress Test: Powering Universities at the Heart of Tomorrow’s Montreal,” by Brett Hooton for Graham Carr, President and Vice-Chancellor, Concordia University

“Warren from Kansas,” by Michael Dieffenbach for Maryam S. Brown, CEO and President, Southern California Gas Company

“Adapting to Deliver. What Brunel’s Legacy Teaches Us About Energy in a Changing World,” by Paul Saville for Fawaz Bitar, Senior Vice President, HSE and Carbon, bp

“Wreaths Across America,” written and delivered by Air Force Lt. Col. Jody Robertson

“Fighting the War Within,” written and delivered by Harold Pittman, Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy (Ret.)

“Towards a True Telecoms Single Market: European Perspectives and Danish Realities,” by Edele Sheehan for Vivek Badrinath, Director General, GSMA

“Mentions of Inventions,” by Julie Lasson for John C. Williams, President and CEO, Federal Reserve Bank of New York

“Looking Forward Together in an Uncertain Time,” by Kristin Zipay with Eileen Frueh for Dr. David J. Skorton, President and CEO, Association of American Medical Colleges

“Turning Anger Into Action,” by Nikitta Foston for Dr. Bruce Scott, Immediate Past President, American Medical Association

“How to Be Successful Without Being a Jerk,” by Francisco Mahfuz and Brian Miller for Eric Fletcher, Founder and CEO, Eric Fletcher Consulting

“Absorbing the Risk: Regulating Menstrual Products,” written and delivered by Sabrina Clendenin, Student, Modesto Junior College

“How Long? Too Long,” by Michael Franklin, Liz Lebron and Kelsi Horn for Ebony Hearn, Executive Director, MIT Introduction to Technology, Engineering, and Science

“Our Legacy,” by Tom Smithyman for Ajei Gopal, President and CEO, Ansys

“How to Reduce Stress Without Sacrificing Success,” by Francisco Mahfuz and Brian Miller for Erika Coleman, Consultant and Speaker

GRAND AWARD WINNER

“Testing Limits”

By Charles Crawford for Dr Robert Floyd,
Executive Secretary, Comprehensive
Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation



Delivered at Nobel Laureate Assembly
for the Prevention of Nuclear War,
University of Chicago, Chicago, July 16, 2025

Distinguished guests, Nobel Laureates, friends,

Today I want to talk about LIMITS.

But following our shared silent thought, I too want to start at Hiroshima.

A city going about its usual business on a bright summer's day.

Then, as if from nowhere,

Firestorms. Tens of thousands of deaths. Appalling injuries.

I had the sombre honour of visiting Hiroshima in August 2023.

Nothing stuck me more deeply than the image of a tiny tricycle.

Shinichi Tetsunani's tricycle.

He was just three years old. Playing on his tricycle in his back yard, over a kilometre from the bomb exploded.

And then—no more.

That terrible day was 80 years ago.

But let's go back 3000 years! To the myths of the ancient Greeks.

Prometheus defies the Gods. He steals fire for us mortals.

Pandora opens the box.

Icarus is warned: "Don't fly too high!" Higher and higher he goes.

The common theme of these stories?

The timeless urge to go beyond the limit of what we know. Or what we're allowed to do.

Nobel Prizes are awarded to those that go beyond the LIMITS of what we know. Advancement for the betterment of all humankind.

I honour you and I thank you for your courage, tenacity and amazing contributions.

So what should we take from these Greek myths?

Like Prometheus' fire, are there some pursuits that warrant risking unknown consequences?

Are there places we shouldn't fly?

Boxes best left unopened?

The power of those stories stays with us.

They go to something deep in the human psyche. We don't like limits!

Yet limits can also be used to mitigate unknown consequences.

The Manhattan Project faced all sorts of limits, of theory and practice.

It needed the greatest brains to work through all the unprecedented scientific complexities.

Over two dozen current or future Nobel Prize winners were associated with it.

Richard Feynman was there.

He won the Nobel Prize for Physics 20 years later.

He captured this deep human striving for knowing more:

"In order to make progress, one must leave the door to the unknown ajar."

80 years ago TODAY. It's called The Gadget.

It's hauled to the top of a steel tower. The Trinity Test.

The Physics Nobel laureate Enrico Fermi is there. He's soon to co-found this great University's Institute of Nuclear Studies. Now known as the Enrico Fermi Institute.

Fermi proposes a wager that alarms the guards. Would the atmosphere itself catch fire, destroying the planet?

Would anyone take the bet?

Fortunately, that doesn't happen.

But when The Gadget explodes, nothing like it has been seen in the Earth's 4.5 billion-year history.

A vast explosion.

We've set free energy trapped in small amounts of matter.

We've gone beyond the LIMITS of science.

Just weeks later—Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We go beyond the LIMITS of war.

Opening the box?

Stealing the fire?

Flying too high?

Robert Oppenheimer knew that other countries would build their own bombs.

Right from the outset he saw the need for organised international cooperation to manage proliferation risks.

But when he famously met President Truman in October 1945, the US President was unconvinced.

President Eisenhower saw things differently. In 1953 he made his landmark 'Atoms for Peace' speech at the United Nations.

This led to the setting up of the International Atomic Energy Agency. My next-door neighbour in Vienna!

The IAEA won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

Oppenheimer was right to fear proliferation.

In August 1961 the Berlin Wall was built.

Then in October the Soviet Union detonated Tsar Bomba. Over 3000

times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb.

A year after that, the Cuban missile crisis.

Around the world there's anxiety and anger about political brinkmanship and the risks of nuclear war.

Staring into the precipice of nuclear oblivion.

Minds get concentrated. If we can't yet agree to ban nuclear bombs, let's at least stop nuclear weapon testing!

A Partial Test-Ban Treaty is signed in 1963. It prohibits nuclear test explosions in the atmosphere, in outer space and under water.

At last ... some LIMITS are put in place.

Then comes the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or NPT in 1968.

A big bold bargain between states that have nuclear weapons and those that don't:

Non-nuclear-weapon states agree never to pursue nuclear weapons

Nuclear-weapon states agree to pursue nuclear disarmament, and

All states to have access to the peaceful uses of nuclear technology.

The NPT negotiators couldn't agree a complete ban on testing. But its pre-ambular text spelled out the ambition:

"... to seek to achieve the discontinuance of all test explosions of nuclear weapons for all time, and to continue negotiations to that end"

Ending ALL test explosions! For ALL time!

Ambition is one thing. Delivering on ambition is something else.

Three long decades pass.

At last in September 1996 the international community agrees a Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. The CTBT.

The CTBTO is set up. The organisation giving effect to that Treaty. I represent it here with you today.

Nuclear weapons and the policy issues they raise, test our LIMITS.

Limits of ethics.

Limits of science.

Limits of policy and diplomacy.

CTBTO addresses these subtle and critical issues.

I want to show you why it's been so successful.

And to ask this distinguished Assembly to use its voice to make this fine Treaty even more effective.

I won't say much about the limits of ethics.

That's always a fraught topic! In each countries' domestic policies. At the international level. Sometimes in our own families!

But it's clear that as weapons, nuclear bombs fall into a unique ethical category.

They make possible MUTUALLY ASSURED DESTRUCTION. The human species wiped out.

Today any state USING a nuclear weapon would cross an ethical and policy threshold.

Taking world affairs into a period of dark, dangerous unpredictability.

ONE PANDORA'S BOX THAT MUST STAY SHUT!

What of the limits of science?

A striking example of surpassing scientific limits helped bring about the CTBT itself.

It's hard to grasp now how nuclear weapons testing accelerated after the Trinity test and then Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

By the time the Partial Test-Ban Treaty was signed in 1963 there'd been close to 500 tests.

Tests in the atmosphere. In the sea. On the land. And underground.

That Partial Test-Ban Treaty was largely respected. But underground weapons tests continue.

At the dizzy rate of roughly ONE TEST PER WEEK. From 1968

all the way through until the Cold War ended.

BEFORE the CTBT is signed? More than two thousand nuclear weapon tests. Many far bigger than the bomb that devastated Hiroshima.

AFTER the CTBT is signed?

In the nearly three decades from 24 September 1996 when the CTBT was opened for signature, through to today, 9 October 2024?

Fewer than one dozen test events.

In this century, only ONE state has tested a nuclear weapon: North Korea.

In short, explosive testing has almost stopped.

The current record for the longest period between tests anywhere on Earth since Trinity in 1945 is over EIGHT YEARS. 3054 DAYS.

May 1998 to October 2006.

Today it's 2873 DAYS since the last explosion: in North Korea, on 3 September 2017.

We're on track to set a fine new record if we get to 14 January 2026 without another test!

So the CTBT has been a dramatic success.

With each day without a test, the GLOBAL NORM demonstrates its invaluable contribution.

For most people, nuclear weapon testing is now seen as outrageous. Outlandish.

Something casting a shadow on all humanity.

And that NORM WEIGHS ON ALL STATES. Those that have signed and ratified the CTBT.

AND the now very small number that haven't. More on that later.

So, why did it take so long to agree that comprehensive ban on testing?

It comes down to something simple. TRUST. Or the other side of trust: CHEATING!

The nuclear-weapon states could agree to stop testing in the atmosphere, in the ocean, or on the surface. Because those tests could be easily detected.

But how to tell the difference between a secret nuclear test in a remote part of the world, and some sort of earth tremor?

The answer came from science. Different technologies breaking old limits, and opening new possibilities.

A global network of sophisticated monitoring devices taking different measurements:

SEISMIC sensors, for vibrations in the Earth's crust

HYDROACOUSTIC sensors, for vibrations in the oceans

INFRASOUND sensors, vibrations in the air

RADIONUCLIDE sensors, radioactive particles and gases in the atmosphere

These devices feed their data to a central point, using the latest satellite communications technologies.

Analysts use sophisticated software to look for the distinctive patterns created by a nuclear test.

They tell us with speed and accuracy where exactly that test has taken place.

We solve the cheating problem! Testing can't happen without the world knowing.

The end of the Cold War creates a context for thinking differently. Thinking boldly.

By the mid-1990s science and diplomacy come together to agree to set up that visionary new monitoring system under the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.

It's called the International Monitoring System. Over 300 monitoring facilities, all around the globe.

Data continuously streaming to the CTBTO's International Data Centre in Vienna.

Providing 24/7 coverage of every square km of the planet. Only possible through a global partnership. Costs shared with all states.

The Earth is a noisy place!

Earthquakes. Landslides. Volcanoes. Meteors. Quarry-blasting. Plane-crashes.

Explosions in conflicts.

Whale sounds, bouncing through the oceans.

OUR SYSTEM DETECTS IT ALL.

If you're trying to find a needle in a haystack, you look through a LOT of hay!

The point of the Treaty is to spot a nuclear test.

But sometimes it's vital to be sure that an event is NOT a nuclear test!

In October last year two small seismic events were detected in northern Iran.

Social media speculation, misinformation and disinformation spread like wildfire. "A nuclear test has been conducted!"

43 CTBTO IMS seismic stations detected the seismic events. Stations thousands of kilometers away. From Mongolia to Canada.

We had unambiguous scientific evidence.

It took a couple of days to analyse, because the seismic events were so small.

We shared our assessment: these events were natural, earthquakes, not man-made, and NOT nuclear explosions.

The social media noise, the misinformation stopped. The risk of panicky escalation was averted.

In everything CTBTO does today, the science is not a problem.

The IMS has a level of precision well beyond Treaty expectations.

The original design goal—to detect a 1 kiloton explosion anywhere in the world.

Hiroshima had a yield of 15kt.

Today? ½ kiloton. And AI and machine learning will drive this even lower.

Here we reach some LIMITS OF DIPLOMACY!

The Treaty prescribes what the CTBTO will do and how it should do it. It gives a MANDATE agreed by the vast majority of the countries of the world.

We work within that mandate, to establish the global monitoring system and share its data with all States Signatories.

Importantly, the data we gather isn't held by the CTBTO alone.

All States Signatories can access it, and use it for their own national purposes.

This allows amazing new scientific work. On environmental issues and climate. Even discovering a new species of whale.

In 2004, following the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami, our States Signatories agreed that IMS data could be shared with UNESCO-accredited tsunami warning centres.

This now helps save lives.

It's part of the incredible value of the CTBT and its global monitoring system.

Of course, doing this work requires a high level of scientific sophistication.

One of our initiatives has been a scheme to help smaller states set up their own national data centres.

Spreading the Treaty's benefits widely and fairly.

There's no doubt about the biggest diplomatic and policy LIMIT CTBTO faces.

It's the fact that for all its stunning success, the Treaty IS NOT YET IN FORCE.

What does that mean?

When the Treaty was negotiated, part of the deal was that it would enter into force ONLY when all the 44 states listed in its Annex 2 ratified it.

That hasn't happened.

We're working hard to see more and more states sign and ratify the treaty.

And momentum is building.

In the last 3 years, nine states have ratified the treaty. One more has signed it.

As of today, 187 of a possible 196 states have signed the treaty.

And 178 have ratified. That's a lot.

The last few states to sign or ratify: Papua New Guinea, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Solomon Islands. Each with their own distinct voice.

But we're not there yet. For the Treaty to enter into force, we still need 9 specific countries to ratify, including some big ones—China, Russia and the United States.

Importantly, these three have signed, and are committed to uphold the Treaty's object and purpose.

Yet still, the world faces dangerous challenges, the like of which we've not seen in decades.

Among so many risks, one risk stands out

That one of the major nuclear weapon possessor states returns to testing.

THAT WOULD BE CATASTROPHIC.

Because if one big possessor starts testing again, others will almost certainly follow.

A cascade of tests.

Not just about making a deterrence point. But also trying to improve the destructive power of their nuclear weapons.

That in turn could motivate other states to develop nuclear weapons for the first time.

A renewed global nuclear arms race.

How close are we to such an appalling situation? Much too close for comfort!

In recent years we've seen renewed threats to test.

Even threats to use nuclear weapons.

Plus some states accumulating highly enriched uranium for purposes that are difficult to explain.

In short, the threat of nuclear disaster is back.

Back in a way I hoped I'd never again see in my lifetime.

So, what can we do?

Build trust. Reduce uncertainty.

Here's one thing that has been done.

Last year, I visited, for the second time, the US's former test site in Nevada. A transparency visit. My deep thanks to the US for making this possible.

An opportunity to see first-hand the site and hear from the experts that work there.

I would greatly welcome the opportunity to visit similar sites in China and the Russian Federation.

Building transparency. Building trust.

A demonstrated commitment to building greater stability.

That first fateful Trinity test was an astonishing event.

It broke through limits of science.

It opened the way to the huge benefits of peaceful uses of nuclear technology.

But it created new, existential questions.

At the limits of science.

At the limits of policy-making and diplomacy.

At the limits of ethics and responsibility.

At the limits of human nature.

How to control all this? Who decides?

Those two stark questions are still with us 80 years later.

Friends, Nobel laureates, policy leaders.

A world without nuclear testing helps secure a world without nuclear weapons.

It will be a powerful message for global confidence if possessor states restate their commitment not to test.

But let's make the case for more than that!

Let's make the case loud and clear for the world's biggest nuclear powers taking the bold decision to ratify the CTBT.

Now THAT will be a powerful, positive message to the world!

Something the whole world can celebrate.

In 80 years from now, will that year's Assembly of Nobel Laureates be celebrating 160 years of avoiding nuclear war?

Or will they be cursing us, their grandparents, their great grandparents?

For stealing fire from the Gods.

For opening the box.

For flying far too close to the sun.

LIMIT we can. LIMIT we must.

Thank you.

WINNER: AGRICULTURE

“Florida is Where AI Comes to Feed the World”

By Chris Moran for Scott Angle,
Senior Vice President for Agriculture and
Natural Resources, University of Florida



Delivered at the UF/IFAS Center for Applied Artificial
Intelligence in Agriculture Groundbreaking Ceremony,
Balm, Florida, Nov. 7, 2025

Go Gators! Friends, supporters, dignitaries, dreamers and farmers—welcome to a historic day for Florida agriculture!

I’m Scott Angle, the University of Florida’s senior vice president for agriculture and natural resources and the head of UF/IFAS. For a few years now, we at UF/IFAS have been talking about making Florida the Silicon Valley of Agriculture.

Faculty members like Dr. Nathan Boyd take a step toward achieving this vision each time he teaches a machine to do something we’ve done by hand for millennia. Or when he teaches it to do something no human ever could. Florida state senators and members of Congress take a step toward this vision each time they cast a vote to invest in Florida’s future. Farmers and ranchers take a step toward achieving this vision when they groundtruth on the land what scientists develop in the lab.

Today we celebrate a leap forward. Today we begin in earnest to build in brick and mortar what had previously been largely an idea, a message, and an aspiration.

Today we plant a flag in the ground to signal to the nation and the world that Florida is where AI comes to change the way we produce food, feed, fuel and fiber.

Since Ponce de Leon brought cattle to Florida more than 500 years ago, we’ve had the nation’s most resilient and industrious farmers and ranchers. For 150 years the University of Florida has been empowering the people of this great state by providing them with the means to alter their destinies.

Throughout our history, Florida’s elected officials have seen the wisdom of investing in innovation.

Fortune has smiled on Florida. For without any one of these three historical blessings—faculty, farmers and leaders—we would not be where we are today—a place that feeds the world.

The world needs us more than ever. We’re answering that call...

- ...by achieving higher yields AND lower environmental impact.
- ...by overcoming hurricanes, invasive species, pests, plant disease, labor shortages, and trade rules that sometimes seem stacked against us.

And today, we’re announcing our intention to keep doing all this, and doing it even better, by establishing on this site the UF/IFAS Center for Applied Artificial Intelligence in Agriculture.

There are two ways of looking at the world. The economist Thomas Malthus told us 200 years ago that population growth will outrun the food supply. This view holds that human progress would be limited by the weight of consumption and waste.

Florida views the world in a different way. And we’ve repeatedly proven Malthus wrong. Even when 1,000 people a day were moving here, we fed them all. Again and again we have developed technology that races ahead of population growth to solve previously intractable problems.

Florida continues on an upward trajectory because we don’t just talk about our future.... we create it.

That’s what we’re doing today. We’re creating space to incubate the agri-

cultural technologies that will benefit farms from Homestead to Pensacola. It will help us improve management of our forests, our fisheries and our natural resources. We’re going to create the future of Florida right here.

This will be a future where we do not have to choose between importing food or importing labor. A future in which we do not have to choose between working the land or protecting the land. And a future in which we do not have to choose between tradition or modernity.

We can be so audacious because we do this together through the land-grant partnership. It’s a partnership as old as Florida itself. This partnership continues to foster the progress that makes us the envy of the world as a state, as a food producer and as the top-ranked higher education system in the nation.

Posterity will inherit many gifts from what we’re doing here. Every day the technologies we develop here will improve their lives. But beyond the individual breakthroughs, they’ll also benefit from the example of our partnership.

The Center for Applied AI in Agriculture will be an inspiration. It will attract great minds. It will be a tool to recruit the best students. And as a hub of innovation it will be a magnet to attract investment, entrepreneurs, risk takers and tech businesses to Florida. This community and these technologies will reinvent Florida as the Silicon Valley of agriculture.

It’s all going to happen right here. And you helped. Thank you! It’s time to get started on creating the future!

WINNER: ASSOCIATIONS

"Healers and Warriors"

By Jeffrey Crooks for Bobby Mukkamala, MD,
President, American Medical Association



Delivered at the 2025 Interim Meeting of the AMA House of
Delegates, National Harbor, Maryland, Nov. 14, 2025

Madam speaker, members of the board, delegates, colleagues and guests, it is an honor to speak to you this evening.

It is an awesome sight to stand on this stage and look out upon the incredible diversity of our profession.

Almost a thousand physicians.

Every state and specialty.

Different backgrounds and ethnicities.

Some educated and trained here in the U.S., others abroad. But each of us committed to advancing medical practice to create a better future for our colleagues and our patients.

This House—this family—represents what is truly great about our AMA. These gatherings—and the impassioned and informed debates on this floor—showcase the very best of our profession.

I can only simply say thank you for giving me purpose.

When we last convened this House in June—you challenged us to speak louder. To be more resolute against the headwinds we face.

We heard you and I'm proud to say that over the past five months that's exactly what we did.

And the measurements are telling us we are successful. AMA's social media posts have been viewed over 18 million times since June—more than doubling our engagement from the first half of the year.

We've spoken out against the extraordinary financial pressures facing all of us but especially those like me on the front lines—pressure due to 25 years of declining Medicare payment rates.

We opposed the administration's decision to remove well-respected physicians from the advisory panel on immunizations, and have repeatedly

warned against government intrusion into our exam room.

We called for physicians to be exempt from an outrageous application fee for H-1B visas—a hundred thousand dollars per doctor—recognizing the vital role that IMGs, like my parents, play in a health system stretched far too thin.

We've continued to push back against non-science—nonsense—and we loudly reaffirmed the importance of immunization in protecting generations of children from deadly disease like measles.

On these issues and so many others, the AMA remains a steady, trusted voice for science, for evidence, and for ethics that underpin our profession.

But physician advocacy is not just about the opposition we face. It's also about progress we make—and finding common ground to advance the goals of physicians for the good of our patients.

That's why we've worked with federal leaders to modernize e-prescribing, strengthen interoperability, and fight information blocking—long-standing frustrations for every clinician that could be so much better if they simply move us beyond using fax machines!

We've supported efforts to expand nutrition education in medical schools—emphasizing prevention and lifestyle changes as cornerstones of better health and more efficient health care.

We welcomed the administration's AI Action Plan—because we believe health technology must be ethical, transparent, and led by physicians.

We said thank you for taking action to protect our patients from massive drug costs on medications like GLP-1s.

And we applauded long-overdue prior authorization reforms that

could, maybe, just maybe, actually work this time!

The AMA will work with anyone to fix the problems in health care that are driving burnout and physician shortages, that burden us with excessive paperwork and badly designed technology—not a person on the other end that drops us from a 99204 to a 99203. All of these challenges limit people's ability to get the care they need.

This is more than a commitment we share. It is a pledge we took to do what's right.

If you heard my inaugural address in June or have seen me at events or interviewed on television, you know that my hometown of Flint, Michigan, is always close to me. In fact, it is the lens through which I see the very best and worst of our health system.

Flint is a city of startling contradictions. Fiercely proud and filled with tenacity yet deeply troubled by the societal challenges that contribute to high rates of chronic illness, depression, psychological distress, and other conditions that lead to lower life expectancy and diminished quality of life.

There are wonderful doctors in Flint—like my wife Nita, an OBGYN, with whom I'm lucky to share both my life and my practice.

But there are far too few doctors to meet my city's needs and our country's needs.

Wait times for specialists like us can be measured in months.

More than one third of Flint residents live at or below the poverty line and are enrolled in Medicaid.

So, I think about the AMA's advocacy priorities as they relate to my hometown—knowing that the same cracks in the health system that are

devastating physicians and residents of Flint are doing the same in communities across our country.

When the most challenged communities in our country confront public health issues like lead in the water and also the double whammy of lacking the most basic health coverage: Medicaid... We can do better.

In South Dakota—where I spoke last month—there is one primary care physician for every 760 residents, among the highest gaps in the nation.

In Mississippi—where I spoke this summer—there is a significant shortage of OBGYNs—threatening to make matters worse in a state already grappling with some of the worst rates of infant and maternal mortality.

And in Nebraska—where I appeared in August—about two-thirds of its counties are considered medically underserved, with many rural hospitals struggling to stay open.

How do we live with this failure in so many health outcomes? How is this possible in a nation that spends more money on health care—a lot more—than any other country on earth?

And more important for the work we will do here this week: How can we work together to fill these cracks?

How can we leverage the power of the AMA—of every state and specialty society—to achieve this?

Let's start with the most basic: physicians need a sustainable payment model that supports both employed and independent doctors—reflecting the increasing costs of actually running a practice.

We have tried before and will keep trying, even harder—including for Medicare and Medicaid—until our lawmakers share our wisdom in this investment.

We need an adequate physician workforce to alleviate stress on the system and ensure patients always have access to a physician-led team.

We need those doctors to be the best and most highly skilled we can attract—no matter where they're from.

We need a health system that incentivizes preventive care like routine checkups and screenings so that we can spot a health concern before it becomes a life-threatening emergency.

We need to remove barriers to medical school education and make sure all who pursue medicine have a foundation that will prepare them for the health challenges of tomorrow instead of today's massive, increasing debt.

We need technology that enhances, not hinders, our work—tools where we spend less time looking at our screens and more time looking at our patients.

And we need relief from administrative demands that drive burnout, and relief given to us by a system that not only allows—but encourages us—to take care of our own mental health needs and feel the joy in medicine.

This isn't the health system we have today, but it is the health system our AMA is fighting for.

And with your help—and your voice—and our perseverance—this is the health system we will have.

In this room we are a very special physician community—a community of advocates and leaders focused on the biggest health challenges our country faces.

But for me, I continue to face a very personal health challenge that I have not kept a secret.

In fact, my family jokes that I can't stop talking about it. And they're probably right, but it's because I milk 'em for sympathy and use it like a get out of jail free card.

But actually, I share my story of recovery from brain cancer wherever I can because every so often someone reaches out to me to say, "That happened to me, too."

Every time we build one of those connections—it's a bond. And those bonds get stronger whether they are open and honest conversations with our colleagues, or even with our patients.

I have no sorrow for what I am going through. In fact, oddly, I am grate-

ful for the preparation God gave me before I took on this responsibility.

I am thankful for being a patient challenged by the very things that I—that we—fight for as doctors: improved access to care, and a more responsive health care system.

It was one year ago today actually that I stood at a microphone and gave an update to what was then called the Minority Affairs Section. The words weren't coming out right, and were it not for this house showing its concern, my diagnosis of astrocytoma would have been delayed.

I thank this house. I thank you for fighting for me when I wear my patient gown instead of my white coat.

This work of ours sustains me.

When we love what we do—when we're fighting for something that matters—we don't tire. We move forward. We run.

I often check how many days I have left as AMA president. Today it says 204.

I do this not because I'm fatigued but because, when I see the days I have left to run, I'm energized. I run harder because I see the finish line approaching.

Our mission—restoring the joy, meaning, and respect that first drew us into medicine—our mission is worth every ounce of effort.

It is worth the fight.

We must be one AMA—unified, resolute, and committed to the health of our patients and the strength of our profession.

So tonight, I challenge every physician in this room: Let us be healers, yes—but let us be warriors when necessary.

Warriors when we need to fight. Fight for our patients. Fight for our colleagues. Fight for the future of medicine.

Let's tear down barriers and lead with purpose and compassion.

Let us fight when necessary.

Let us heal always.

And let us lead together, forever.

Thank you.

WINNER: EDUCATORS

“The State of Harvard Medical School: Resilience, Transformation, and Our Enduring Legacy”

By Allison Eck for George Q. Daley,
Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Harvard University



Delivered at the Joseph B. Martin Conference Center
Amphitheater, Harvard Medical School, Sept. 17, 2025

Good morning! It’s wonderful to see you all here today, and I’m so grateful to be together in one place—especially in the midst of our tumultuous year.

Let me dive directly into the many challenging issues we’re facing. 2025 has been, without a doubt, one of the most difficult and unsettling times in higher education, here at Harvard, and especially here at Harvard Medical School.

Our mission here at HMS is to promote health and well-being for all. But our ability to fulfill that mission or even pursue that mission has in recent times been encumbered by a wide range of societal factors, including growing skepticism of long-standing public health practices and escalating frustration with rising health care costs in an increasingly privatized and corporatized health care system.

These ingredients, and more, have been simmering for several years now—but in the last year, they’ve boiled over.

Indeed, our challenges came to a head this year when the current administration abruptly froze and then terminated roughly \$2 billion in grants to Harvard. For HMS, this meant the cancellation of 350 federal awards—that’s essentially ALL of our active, direct federal research dollars. A federal judge has ruled that this unprecedented action by our government was unlawful, and we are awaiting the next steps in the implementation of the judge’s ruling. I am proud that Harvard has defended its principles and is standing up for what is just, and what is in the public interest.

While the government has signaled its intention to appeal this ruling—and with that, we know this ruling is not the final word—the federal judge’s decision is, indeed, a victory.

We are facing an increased tax on our endowment. We use those dollars to do important work, like supporting student financial aid. And our negotiated indirect cost rate, which once represented 27% of our research reimbursement revenue, is being threatened and will again reduce the volume and impact of the research and education that Harvard Medical School can provide.

On top of these funding cuts, the administration has launched a series of investigations into our admissions processes, our international collaborations, and our patents. Our ability to host international students and scholars has been restored by judicial action and therefore remains intact for now, but uncertainty and instability persist. I resolve to fight to maintain our right to educate, train, and employ the most talented individuals at Harvard Medical School, and to sustain our commitment to recruiting and nurturing the remarkable students who come to this community to learn and to serve.

It pains me to witness the anxiety and frustration that so many of you have been enduring. Please believe me when I say I am with you. We are in this together. Amidst all the uncertainty, you can be certain of one thing: I and my leadership team are focused on advancing our research and securing the resources to support you.

Yes, the decades-long strategic partnership between Harvard Medical School and the federal government to advance discovery and innovation has made so many of our pivotal breakthroughs possible. Federal support of HMS has helped us build a storied legacy—has helped catalyze cancer immunotherapies, drugs for diabetes and obesity, cures for genetic diseases like

sickle cell anemia, and fundamental insights into human physiology.

That legacy sets the stage, but it doesn’t foretell how the play will unfold. The next act is ours to write.

We cannot and will not rest on our laurels. We have so much more to do here, and so much more to achieve. As we contemplate the future of our research enterprise, we must bear in mind that the model of support from the National Institutes of Health and other federal agencies is not a given—nor is it the only way we can succeed.

While we navigate this ever-shifting landscape, I can promise this: The current crisis will not be our undoing, and I am optimistic about our future prospects. I am confident that we will find ways to thrive. I am confident because all of you are so remarkably dedicated, resourceful, and resilient.

Today, I want to speak with you about a number of topics. First, our finances. I will explain what we are facing, and I will discuss how we are responding proactively and thoughtfully.

Second, I will share what we’re doing to help early-career faculty, post-docs, and graduate students, and I’ll also share some scientific achievements from the past year.

Third, I want to highlight our successes of late, particularly in fundraising and in coming together as a community for collective introspection.

And fourth, I will show how all of these efforts come together in our updated strategic plan, which you may have read about already in my September 3 community email.

Before we dive in, I will say this: Our grant cancellations have left critical basic science research hanging in the balance—the kind of research that

has led to transformative therapies that many people today take for granted.

This unlawful act affects everyone.

As former NIH Director Elias Zerhouni once said, “Disease knows no politics.” Elias has written a memoir of the same title, and I strongly encourage you to read it.

Indeed, the cuts to Harvard’s research programs erase many of what have been our most dependable avenues for discovery, for developing the insights that lead to tomorrow’s cures, advances which are deeply relevant to us all. No matter who you are, no matter what your values or political orientation, we are all at the mercy of our own biology.

But when scientists are not respected, when scientific reasoning is not the basis for rendering sound policy on matters of public health, we become susceptible to the return of diseases which science itself has long eradicated.

Disease knows no politics.

It is true: We may never know what discoveries won’t be made as a result of the setbacks we’ve experienced this year. But we are going to work to sustain and advance the research that is core to our HMS mission as best we can.

Now, for a snapshot of our finances:

As you’ll see in this chart, in FY24, our support in federal dollars totaled more than \$230 million, representing 73% of our research funding and almost 30% of our annual operating revenue. In FY25, that total increased to \$251 million, which rose to 75% of our total sponsored funding.

Right now, our federal dollars have virtually dried up, placing greater priority on securing non-federal sources of support. Recall I just said that I am optimistic because HMS is composed of the most capable and resourceful talent. I want to note that as our federal grants have shrunk, we have seen the number of applications to foundation grants **MORE THAN DOUBLE**. That is a testament to the creativity and persistence of our faculty.

A second area of opportunity is enhanced collaboration with and support from industry sources. Executive Direc-

tor of Therapeutics Translation Mark Namchuk has been laying remarkable groundwork to expand our partnerships with industry. Mark has several extremely promising projects under development, and we look forward to announcing them once the ink is dry.

Mark and I are thinking of the current crisis as a moment for us to initiate a total paradigm shift in how we work with industry. There is no other entity like Harvard Medical School that can convene the best minds to solve problems of great consequence—so let us do that in partnership with our scientific colleagues in industry, by launching true collaborations where our scientists will work alongside industry experts in our labs at HMS and in their labs here in the greater Boston area.

There is a reason Boston is called Genetown—we have everything we need, right here, to get to work and solve major biomedical problems. As one dynamic academic biomedical ecosystem.

Indeed, a prime example of how we are preparing for a new future can be seen in the Harvard Enterprise Research Campus, the ERC, in Allston. The ERC is a grand experiment, convening faculty and trainees from all of Harvard’s schools to forge bold new academic enterprises like the Kempner Institute for the Study of Natural and Artificial Intelligence. Harvard’s best minds and talents will coexist at the ERC alongside colleagues in industry, beginning with its first tenant, the Roche Genentech Innovation Center. Roche has been an excellent collaborator with Harvard in the past, and we believe that track record will enable successful collaborations in the future.

Right on our own quadrangle, our Blavatnik Harvard Life Lab Longwood is currently incubating 9 companies and has already launched several new external ventures, including Somite AI, which recently raised \$57 million to revolutionize the production of any human cell type.

At the same time, our new financial realities are compelling us to revise current programs to maintain excellence within a more limited scope.

Harvard Catalyst has since 2008 been the brainchild of Lee Nadler, who has focused his extraordinary vision on nurturing clinical research and training translational physician-scientists. Lee has been guiding a restructuring in response to funding cuts that even pre-dated our current predicament, and is now turning over the reins of leadership to Lindsey Baden, who will bring his formidable talents to Harvard Catalyst. We all feel deeply indebted to Lee for his many decades of service to the Harvard Medical community, and look forward to Lindsey’s stewardship in the years to come.

While we have made great progress over the past few years to bring our expenses in line with our revenues and to balance the unrestricted portion of our budget, I want to acknowledge that we have the responsibility to right-size our research, education, and administrative enterprise so that our expenses do not outpace our revenues—especially when the distributions from our endowment, which have allowed us to sustain a larger range of services to our community, will shrink starting in FY27, thanks to the increased endowment tax. We must take the current crisis as an opportunity to restructure.

The looming questions remain: How do we sustain our leadership in research and education at HMS, despite dramatically reduced resources? And how can we deploy our dollars most effectively as we look toward the future?

Part of the answer has come in the form of \$90 million in research sustainability funding from the University to HMS for FY25 and FY26. We at HMS are tremendously grateful to President Alan Garber, Provost Manning, Chief Financial Officer Ritu Kalra, and members of the Corporation for extending this generosity.

The University has asked us to match that \$90 million, but at HMS we not only matched the \$90 million, we added an additional \$30 million, for a total of \$120 million dollars coming directly from HMS to support our community.

Thanks to this crucial sustainability funding, our graduate and MD-PhD students are supported for full tuition and stipend for this year. Our junior faculty will also be financed to 100% of their startup guarantees. And after that, we are giving department chairs autonomy to utilize block grants in accordance with their departmental needs.

We project that the research sustainability funds—supplemented by lab rainy day funds and department discretionary funds—will enable us to sustain an average of 74% of our federal sponsored research activity through FY26.

It is critical to think of the research sustainability funding as a temporary stopgap measure. We cannot maintain this level of School subsidy. Accordingly, the University has asked us to reduce our research enterprise by at least 20% by the end of this fiscal year, and I want to thank our department chairs and all of our faculty for earnestly endeavoring to meet that goal.

Indeed, we are on track to winnow our overall research enterprise by at least 20%. And given the dark clouds hanging over not only Harvard's federal grant dollars, but over all of the NIH, reducing our research spending and focusing on our most critical research is the responsible thing to do.

We take some comfort that the House and Senate appropriations committees have restored, with bipartisan enthusiasm, most of the proposed NIH budget cuts put forward by the administration. However, there are still major revisions to so-called indirect cost reimbursements, and we could still see executive actions that limit research spending.

In short, we must plan for a future where federal sponsorship of research will be leaner. And the increase in the endowment tax means less School subsidy available for essential programs like financial aid and discretionary grant funding. As heart-rending as it is, we have to adjust.

I'll remind you, as Chief Financial Officer Julie Joncas showed at an all-staff town hall back in April, the vast majority of our endowment is

restricted to specific uses. Our endowment will buffer our current shortfalls, and we will spend some discretionary dollars prudently. But if we were to extract \$250 million a year from the endowment to cover our lost federal research funds and projected deficits, we would deplete all of our discretionary accounts in just a few years.

As I mention our CFO Julie Joncas, I also want to thank her and applaud her and her team for their careful stewardship of our finances, and I want to express my thanks for the diligence, dedication, and expertise of so many on the HMS administrative leadership team—Executive Dean for Administration Lisa Muto, my Chief of Staff Jen Ryan, and everyone else in my office—Lorien Hecht, Zoe Spearman, and Karin Cowles. Without my office co-workers, I would not be able to manage. Thank you.

Through aggressive management actions we have taken over the past year, we have been able to continue to advance our priorities while also adapting to the realities of our financial constraints. These actions—including our pause on hiring, our pause on merit increases, as well as our request for all academic and administrative departments to reduce discretionary spending by 15%—have not been without pain. Again, I want to thank all of our department chairs and department administrators for your careful management of our costs through this tumultuous time.

A bright spot has been fundraising. Under Matt Durno's leadership and in partnership with faculty, the HMS Alumni Affairs and Development team closed out fiscal year 2025 \$39 million over the anticipated budget for current-use gifts. We raised \$8 million to support MD-PhD students, as the federal funding for this program was recently terminated. And in the past year, we've received gifts from approximately 4,000 generous alumni and friends, including over 700 individuals who donated to HMS for the first time following Harvard's response to the federal government's demands this spring.

I have received heartfelt messages ... a note from a nurse in Mississippi thanking Harvard ... a note from a Yale graduate saying he never thought he'd be sending money to Harvard but thanking us for being a defender of truth, and a vanguard of freedom.

People understand that Harvard Medical School seeks to fulfill a moral imperative—an imperative to alleviate suffering, to exercise compassion to its fullest degree, and to enable health and well-being for all. The messages and the dollars are much appreciated.

Good news aside, we're also taking proactive measures to retain our institutional resilience. We're deferring \$40-60 million of capital projects, plus a chunk of our operating budget for small projects. My gratitude to Chief Campus Planning and Facilities Officer Steve Maiorisi and his entire team for their prudent prioritization of our academically oriented projects and essential infrastructure. That includes the Goldenson façade and the completion of the West Commons project. We are also grateful to have transformed Gordon Hall into an administrative flex space, a decision that is saving us \$9 million a year. And we are continually looking for ways to consolidate, explore efficiencies, and conserve energy across the Longwood campus.

One major challenge to our educational mission has been the threat to deprive Harvard of the right to host international students and trainees. We have received favorable legal action, and for now we continue to be a magnet for brilliant scholars from around the world, many of whom remain in the U.S. and become our intellectual and corporate leaders.

I want to thank our Office for Graduate Education under Dean Roz Segal, who has been working tirelessly with the Harvard International Office to ensure that our graduate programs remain robust, whether in person or online. She and her team have been assisting the many PhD students affected by the abrupt cancellation of \$15 million in direct support to students in the form of federal training grants and fel-

lowships. These terminations, and the marked uncertainty in federal funding of science, are already causing alarm across the entire academic-industrial spectrum. And the number of postdoctoral trainees is dwindling nationwide amidst serious concerns about the academic pipeline.

Despite all these obstacles, there are new opportunities born of visionary benefactors who believe in Harvard Medical School. I am thrilled to announce an extremely generous new gift from K. Lisa Yang, who has pledged \$30 million to establish the K. Lisa Yang Brain Body Center at HMS. The sister center to MIT's Yang Brain Body Center, this HMS center will bring together experts from diverse disciplines to solve the mysteries related to brain-body communication.

I am thrilled that Harvard now has two centers within the Yang Tan Collective—and with it, even greater opportunities to partner with our MIT colleagues. This center, to be led by HMS's Chair of Neurobiology David Ginty and former Chair Mike Greenberg, will advance cutting-edge neuroscience and fuel generations of young researchers. I am thankful to Lisa for her continued investment in science and in future leaders, both here and at so many other worthy institutions.

While we will continue to invest in our faculty and our trainees, we must also reimagine who we are and how we can fulfill our mission. To ready ourselves for a very different future, we must challenge every assumption we have—including the assumption that we, as individuals, are powerless. Indeed, each of you has a very important role to play.

In fact, I've tasked a working group of faculty and staff, the Advisory Committee on Research Sustainability, or ACRS, with soliciting a wide variety of viewpoints from across our campus and brainstorming bold new ideas to keep HMS at the cutting edge of biomedical discovery. Susan Dymecki, the George Fabyan Professor and vice chair of Genetics, and David Ginty, the Lefler Professor and chair of Neurobiology,

are leading this work in close coordination with our pre-clinical chairs, and the group will assemble input to help advise me on how we can deploy our resources most efficiently.

The ACRS committee reflects the collaborative approach to shared governance and informed decision-making that I seek for addressing the major challenges confronting HMS.

I have also endeavored to hear from as many of you as possible. The seven large-group community breakfasts we hosted this past academic year allowed me to listen to students, staff, postdocs, and faculty as they spoke with candor and vulnerability across personal and political differences. Similarly, I established the HMS Working Group on Open Inquiry, chaired by former Dean Jeff Flier, precisely because we cannot disentangle the processes of learning and discovery from the processes of spirited dialogue and constructive debate. They are one and the same.

All of these initiatives share a common thread: They recognize that collective introspection will help us become a better institution.

Indeed, committing ourselves to honest self-examination honors our most engrained institutional values. This university has asked itself time and again how it can do better—how it can search for truth, *veritas* ... including the truth about our own shortcomings. That is what we have always done, and it's what we must continue to do.

Speaking of *veritas*, earlier this month I announced a substantial gift to support the School's top priorities. In recognition of this gift, the New Research Building has been renamed the Veritas Science Center—because *veritas* is Harvard's motto, and Harvard Medical School will never stop seeking the truth.

Indeed, walking through the doors of the Veritas Science Center will be a constant reminder—to ourselves and to the world—that the work of science is to investigate, reveal, and behold the truth.

Another exciting development that will help invigorate our quest for truth

is a \$19 million commitment from Len Blavatnik and the Blavatnik Family Foundation to extend their long-standing support of the Blavatnik Therapeutics Challenge Awards, which has enabled HMS faculty to usher basic science insights toward translational impact. We've seen tremendous success with this program. Of the 20 projects awarded in the first five years, 7 have achieved a major milestone: the founding of a new company, the licensing of technology, or the initiation of clinical testing.

Len Blavatnik's generous philanthropy will also launch the new Blavatnik Institute Early-Career Investigator Awards, which will distribute some \$5 million to Quad-based junior faculty. And we've raised another \$4.4 million to support postdocs, the beating heart of so many of our labs. All together, we've raised close to \$10 million to support junior faculty and postdoctoral trainees—the members of our HMS community who are in their most vulnerable formative years.

Indeed, for trainees and junior faculty, the chaos of the past few months has been brutal. Our early-career scientists are making pivotal decisions about their lives at this very moment—choices that will have consequences for scientific progress, patients and their families, and ultimately, American prosperity. We must do everything we can to help them.

The fresh outlook and dynamism of our young scientists keep HMS in a state of healthy evolution. Our young scholars are poised to succeed the great luminaries who came before them—among many others, luminaries like Gerhard Wagner, who served for more than 30 years in the Department of Biological Chemistry and Molecular Pharmacology. Gerhard pioneered the field of multidimensional NMR spectroscopy, and he retired in July.

Gerhard's insatiable curiosity and scientific leadership has earned him an illustrious legacy. His former trainees are leaders throughout academia and industry, and some of them oversee the NMR core at HMS, one of many cores

on our campus that provide essential technology resources and expertise to scientists across our community.

Another faculty member who is retiring in just a few weeks and leaving a distinguished legacy is Rick Born. Rick is an inspiring scientist and educator who has transformed the teaching of systems neuroscience and quantitative methods to HMS medical and graduate students over many years. He led our PhD Program in Neuroscience, the #1 neuroscience program in the U.S.—a program that has graduated exceptional students into the field, including one of Rick’s former PhD students, HMS Assistant Professor of Neurobiology Carlos Ponce. The Ponce lab, in fact, now inhabits Rick’s old office space. Carlos has told me that every day he sits in Rick’s office, he feels inspired by his legacy. In Carlos’s words, and I quote, “He showed me that a scientist cares not only about his lab, but also about people in general and the good society they can create.”

My sincerest gratitude to both of you—Gerhard and Rick—for your outstanding service, and to the other faculty who have retired or announced their impending retirement this academic year: Martin Dorf, Max Nibert, Arthur Kleinman, and Stephen Lory. Although these distinguished faculty are retiring from HMS, they are not retiring from memory or influence. They have paved the way, and they are making space for the HMS life cycle to continue, and for the next generation to lead science and bolster HMS.

Indeed, our early-career scientists are exceptionally talented and resourceful, and that gives me great hope for the future. Many have already surmounted substantial hurdles to be here today.

Take Kamila Naxerova, HMS assistant professor of genetics. When Kamila was five years old and growing up in Czechoslovakia, her mother took her on a vacation to West Germany, leaving Kamila’s father behind. But it wasn’t a real vacation—it was a plan to escape communist rule.

You see, Kamila’s father Jaroslav was a radiologist, banished from academia

for opposing the government. Strict controls on travel for entire families—designed to prevent defection—meant that Jaroslav had to get creative.

Using a motor from an old car and hand-carved wood for the propeller, he built his own plane in hopes of crossing the Iron Curtain and reuniting with his family. One broken leg and two years later, Jaroslav landed in West Germany, reuniting with Kamila, a day she describes as the happiest of her young life.

Following in her father’s footsteps, Kamila became a scientist—and she landed at Harvard Medical School for her PhD and postdoctoral studies.

Kamila discovered, very quickly, the freedom of the American academic environment. Finally, she thought to herself, her motivation can be channeled productively. Her ambition has a place—a place that feels like home.

Today, Kamila’s research on colon cancer is critical. By 2040, early-onset colorectal cancer is predicted to be the top cause of cancer-related death in adults aged 20 to 49.

Kamila couldn’t be here today—but let us acknowledge that she, like so many others, is an immigrant—attracted to HMS because of the excellence of our community. Unfazed by challenge and undaunted by difference, our students and scholars born or raised internationally come here to rigorously evaluate their audacious ideas and earn their place among our faculty. Some, like Kamila, become our superstars.

As for our research itself, this was a banner year for HMS science—a year that has proven the adage that science is a long march toward discovery.

Take the research of Bruce Yankner, HMS professor of genetics and neurology. Ten years ago, he became curious about lithium while using it to study a neuroprotective protein. His lab partnered with brain banks across the country to acquire postmortem brain tissues and blood samples from thousands of people across a range of cognitive health and disease.

When the team looked at levels of trace metals, they discovered that

lithium occurs normally in the brain, and its deficiency is one of the earliest changes preceding Alzheimer’s disease. Amazingly, they found that in mice, lithium depletion accelerated memory decline ... and a novel, inexpensive lithium compound restored function at extremely low doses. This journey has been just one part of Bruce’s quest to shed light on a devastating disease that affects as many as 400 million people worldwide.

Bruce, are you here? Please stand—congratulations to you and your team and thank you for your perseverance.

So much excellence is found in our labs, classrooms, and clinics. In the past year, HMS scientists have discovered that a single faulty copy of the BRCA1 gene can fuel breast cancer. HMS scientists have pinpointed a biologic mechanism that helps explain the link between the gut microbiome and depression. And HMS scientists have developed a stem cell therapy for damage to the cornea that was previously thought irreversible.

HMS faculty have won major prizes this past year—the Nobel Prize to Gary Ruvkun, the Gairdner Prize to Spyros Artavanis-Tsakonas, the Breakthrough Prize to Joel Habener and Alberto Ascherio.

For many of our scientists—for all of us—the past eight months have been an emotional rollercoaster. But from that rollercoaster, we have an opportunity to build the momentum and courage we need to ascend to greater heights.

It’s the exact right time, then, for us to regroup and update our HMS strategic plan to be more forward-looking and adaptable. This process, a required part of our school’s accreditation process, is being led by our Institutional Planning and Effectiveness team and will culminate in an LCME site visit in April 2027. Many of you saw this acronym when I shared it in my recent email to the community, and I will share it on the screen as a reminder.

You will recognize in these six initiatives many of the topics we’ve discussed today. Notably, “BEACON” begins with B and ends with N—because our

success at HMS begins with belonging and ends in newfound resilience.

Newfound resilience doesn't mean that we've never had it! In fact, think about where we were five years ago, in 2020—an equally tumultuous year—and how far we've come since then:

Five years ago, the pandemic revealed the dual emergencies of physician burnout and declining student mental health. Today, we've provided 80 physician-educators at our major affiliated hospitals with dedicated time to give MD students more personalized attention during their clerkships. We've invested in more flexible promotion tracks. And our Student Well-Being Ambassador Program hires students to lead the activities they most want to see, and guide discussions about the issues that most affect them.

Five years ago, we could not have imagined that ChatGPT would arrive on the scene and take the world by storm. Today, we have a new PhD track focused on AI in Medicine. We have AI models that identify drugs for repurposing and predict how viruses will evolve. And we have a Program in Medical Education that is both rigorous and AI-fortified under Bernard Chang's resourceful and sharp deanship.

Five years ago, MassCPR was in full swing, congregating hundreds of local scientists, clinicians, and public health professionals to study the SARS-CoV-2 virus and combat COVID-19. Today, we've seen great returns on our investments in local coordination, with Governor Maura Healey recently unveiling a \$400 million plan to bolster research and teaching throughout the state's innovation economy.

Five years ago, HMS and the world were blessed to have Paul Farmer still in our midst. Today, our Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, under the able leadership of Vikram Patel, is channeling Paul's convictions to equip global partners to help pursue health equity worldwide. Under the Paul Farmer Collaborative, HMS worked with the University of Global Health Equity in Rwanda to establish Africa's first consortium

of medical schools. Grounded in African leadership, the consortium's inaugural summit in March brought together delegates from 115 medical schools across 32 countries to promote the needs of students and faculty across the continent. Paul would have applauded this effort to ensure that African medical schools and health systems can sustain themselves and truly thrive.

Five years ago, we could not have reimagined where we'd be right now—neither the struggles we've endured, nor the tangible strides we've made.

What about five years from now, in 2030? What do we want to see, and who do we want to be?

We want Harvard Medical School to be a place where no admitted student is compelled to study elsewhere purely for financial reasons. We want to be part of a biomedical ecosystem in which doors of opportunity are easily opened. We want academic freedom ... we want transparent, data-driven funding decisions ... and we want restored investment in equitable, patient-centered research.

How do we turn our vision into reality? It's up to us—no one else can do it for us. Yes, there are forces beyond our campus that we cannot control. But we can always rededicate ourselves to the everlasting importance of our mission. We can always find extraordinary people at Harvard Medical School, wherever we turn. And we can always take stock in our colleagues' resilience—find hope in their personal transformation—and allow it to foster ours.

HMS is a place where lives are made, and remade. No matter where you come from, no matter your upbringing, each of you holds resilience inside of you. And each of you has transformed yourself in some way, big or small, to be sitting here today.

Just as you have transformed yourselves—just as Harvard Medical School has transformed YOU—I am now asking all of you, all of us, to channel that same focus and energy into helping transform Harvard Medical School.

I want to end today with a personal story about resilience and transformation, from a member of our community.

New York City, 2001: A young member of the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve works at the New York Stock Exchange as an assistant trader. When he steps outside one fall morning, he notices burning paper falling from the sky. A cacophony of sirens. He turns and sees the North Tower of the World Trade Center burning; a perfect, sunny day turns dark with acrid smoke.

The trader is 23-year-old Rob Dickson, and this experience of being witness to the horrors of 9/11 changes his life. It teaches him how much he desires to be of service to people. In 2004, he volunteers for deployment with a Marine Corps civil affairs unit and is assigned to infantry battalion in Ramadi, Iraq, where he works with local communities to enhance security and facilitate communications, often speaking with local physicians and doing assessments at hospitals and water treatment plants.

Today, as HMS Director of Campus Services, Rob is revered for his 20+ years of excellence in physical security management, campus operations, and more.

Rob still remembers the smell of Ground Zero smoldering. But even more than that, he remembers the selflessness of the first responders ... and the compassion people demonstrated toward one another in the aftermath.

For Rob to be with us at HMS is a tremendous gift. He knows what resilience looks like. He knows what solidarity looks like. And he takes pride in being part of the HMS community, which—in his words—“cares about doing the right thing by others and for humanity.”

Rob, please stand so we can celebrate you.

Rob Dickson and so many others in our community remind us that we strive to be better selves. I am hopeful and I am optimistic about Harvard's future because we are a community of strivers and servants, thinkers, and doers. All of you will persevere and

innovate and succeed because you have always tackled challenges head on and prevailed.

I am optimistic because of Isabella Daneri, a first-gen college student who participated in Project Success, a program run by the HMS Office for Culture and Community Engagement that provides lab experiences and mentors to high schoolers in Boston and Cambridge. Isabella has a clinical observership in vascular surgery at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, and last year, she flew to the Dominican Republic to receive the Excelling Dominican Student Abroad Award from the country's president.

I am optimistic because of Irving Barrera, who left his Mexican hometown at age 16 for an exchange program in the U.S. and who is now an HMS MD student, volunteer at homeless shelters, and newly minted U.S. citizen. I am optimistic because of Jill Jones, a fifth-year MD-PhD student who is devoted to the clinical science of pedi-

atric brain tumors. And I am optimistic because of the intrepid leaders of our postdoctoral associations, who do so much for our community.

I believe in ALL of you. The current crisis is testing us, no doubt about it. But we must remain true to our mission of discovery, training and education, and service—no matter what happens. We must continue harvesting our successes and investing in more efficient ways to do our work.

And in moments when we feel like giving up, let us remember the people who have given so much of themselves to the biomedical enterprise—people like my mentor, the late David Baltimore, who passed away earlier this month at the age of 87.

Throughout his life, David witnessed so many breakthroughs in biomedicine, and he himself catalyzed a revolution in molecular biology. In grieving the loss of my mentor, I've been thinking a lot about the future—about the devel-

opments David won't see, the epiphanies he won't experience, the major transformations in care he won't hear about or have the chance to applaud.

Because the developments, the epiphanies, the major transformations ... they will keep happening. Creativity and resourcefulness will always be innate to the scientific enterprise, no matter the chaos. We bring our humanity to it, and in turn, it becomes bigger than us—bigger than David, bigger than any of our predecessors, and indeed, bigger than any financial setback.

Thank you all for being a part of our mission, and for entrusting me with the responsibility to steward it. I promise I will do everything I can to continue making Harvard Medical School a welcoming place to land ... an institution that will never be perfect but is always striving toward better ... and a home where a person can be empowered to change the world. Thank you.

WINNER: ENERGY

"Re-Defining the Global Energy Transition"

By Stewart Price for Amin Nasser,
President & CEO, Saudi Aramco

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Delivered at CERAWeek,
Houston, March 10, 2025

Thank you Dan, and good morning Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is always exciting to be in Houston for CERAWeek.

But the buzz is special this year.

We can all feel the winds of history in our industry's sails again.

And today I would like to explain why.

For over a decade, and along with others from our industry, I have felt a growing responsibility to highlight the inherent flaws in the current energy transition plan.

This stems from a deep commitment to our consumers around the world.

And to an energy future that includes genuine reductions in GHG emissions and a strong focus on sustainability.

However, like many of you in this room, I am an engineer to my core.

I evaluate plans through the lens of inputs and outputs, or "bang for the buck" as you say in America.

With almost 10 trillion dollars of transition-related spending worldwide, and two decades of effort, the inputs are clear.

And the promised outputs were promoted with unwavering confidence.

There would be a full inventory of essential and genuinely competitive transition technologies.

A new world of cheaper, more secure, and more sustainable alternative energy would be imminent by swiftly consigning conventional energy to the history books.

And with wide-ranging global co-operation, universal access would guarantee fairness for everyone.

Many of us knew these promises were impossible to keep, but our industry no longer had a seat at the table.

It has taken a decade in the transition debate wilderness to expose the fallacies, and the real-world consequences of group-think.

For example, the cost.

Besides the 10 trillion dollars already spent, it is estimated that global climate action will need a staggering 6 to 8 trillion dollars more...every year.

Still, if alternatives were ready, those who pushed hardest and fastest to cut conventional energy should be the envy of the world.

Instead, it has been a painful awakening for those who thought energy affordability and security could be taken for granted.

Europe is paying roughly double for electricity compared with five years ago, and 3 to 4 times that of the U.S. and China.

And some countries are losing their industrial base and jobs as companies consider relocating to stay competitive, or shut down.

Another reality is that the wealthiest 1 billion people in the world consume 40 percent of global energy.

But it is the poorest 7 billion that will account for most of the growth in energy demand as they climb the prosperity ladder.

Yet they have received just 15 percent of energy transition investments, while technology transfer and capacity building levels are far too low.

Then there was the fiction that critical transition technologies are genuinely competitive and being rapidly deployed.

Take green hydrogen.

Many were aiming for 1 dollar per kilogram by 2030.

Yet production costs alone currently range wildly from almost 4 dollars per kilogram to 12 dollars.

That is 200 to 600 dollars per barrel of oil equivalent!

Or look at very long-term energy storage, where most technology is still early and costly, and the payback period ranges from 15 to 40 years.

So, relying too much on intermittent renewables, without sufficient back-up and grid scale long-term storage, makes 24/7 reliability a tough challenge.

And bear in mind that global electricity consumption is expected to double by 2050, with air conditioning and electrification, along with AI and

data centers, consuming a large share of that growth.

In heavy transport and heavy industries, which together consume up to 60 percent of global oil supplies, alternatives have barely made a dent.

Even with EVs, we see growing push-back from consumers who value choice and affordability over mandates.

This is forcing automakers to re-focus their efforts on cost-effective hybrids and more efficient internal combustion engines.

So, if the total penetration of EVs is still only 4 percent, and if wind & solar combined is also less than 4 percent of global energy supplies, then we are barely 4 miles into a 100 mile journey!

Indeed, the greatest transition fiction was that conventional energy could be almost entirely replaced, virtually overnight.

The last time this actually happened was when whale oil demand collapsed around 150 years ago!

Hydrocarbons still provide over 80 percent of primary energy here in the US, almost 90 percent in China, and even in the EU it is more than 70 percent.

And, in absolute terms, the world consumes vastly more hydrocarbons than it did three decades ago—about 100 million barrels per day of oil equivalent.

Even wood and traditional biomass have not fallen much in 200 years when people thought coal, then oil and gas, would take their place.

So I pay little attention to forecasts claiming that next year will be peak this, or peak that.

This is simply history repeating itself. New sources add to the energy mix and complement existing sources.

They do not replace them.

That is why the current strategy of prematurely switching to immature alternatives has been so self-destructive.

New sources cannot even meet the growth in demand, while the proven

sources needed to fill the gap are demonized and discarded.

It is a fast-track to dystopia, not utopia.

In short, the net result of 10 trillion dollars over 2 decades is to basically stand still and consume record quantities of coal.

Not exactly mission accomplished!

In fact, there is more chance of Elvis speaking next than the current plan working!

And a wave of public dissatisfaction with transition reality is crashing over countries, companies, and consumers alike.

So, a new model of future energy is urgently needed that reflects the reality of growing demand and energy addition.

And I believe it should be based on three core principles.

First, all sources must play a growing role in meeting rising energy demand in a balanced, integrated manner.

Certainly, that includes new and alternative energy sources.

But they will complement conventional energy, not replace it in any meaningful way.

So we need investments in all sources.

At Aramco, we are playing our part, investing more than 50 billion dollars last year in both conventional energy and several renewable energy projects.

For example, we have a target to invest in up to 12 gigawatts of solar and wind energy by 2030.

And to further free up such investments globally we need extensive de-regulation, and greater incentives for financial institutions to provide unbiased financing.

Second, the model must genuinely serve the needs of developed and developing nations alike, as originally promised, especially when it comes to technology.

Third, and crucially, this has to be about delivering real results.

Let me be absolutely clear: this does not mean stepping back from our global climate ambitions.

Reducing GHG emissions must still get the highest possible priority.

That means prioritizing technologies that drive efficiency, lower energy use, and further reduce GHG emissions from conventional energy.

And AI will clearly be a game-changing enabler.

But the future of energy is not only about sustainability.

Security and affordability must share the stage.

With all energy sources working in harmony as one team, delivering real results.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the world was promised many things in the current transition plan.

It was like promising an energy El Dorado.

And this quest was equally doomed to fail.

I take no pleasure in this.

But it is time to stop reinforcing failure.

Indeed, as the fictions of the promised transition finally wash away, there is an historic opportunity to change course.

So let's shape an energy future the world actually wants, can actually afford, and can actually reach, including climate goals.

And with the winds of history in our sails again, let's use our industry's vast experience and practical expertise to usher in a truly golden new era of abundant, affordable, and sustainable energy for all.

Thank you.

WINNER: INSURANCE

"Movement is Medicine: Why Health Insurance Must Cover Exercise"

Written and delivered by Monique Fuentes



Delivered at Modesto Junior College,
Modesto, California, Nov. 17, 2025

You notice the humming of lights in a quiet office. Your heartbeat grows louder as your doctor blankly stares at your results. He says: "You have stage 3 colon cancer." As he leaves the room, you are left confused because you don't smoke. That was the reality for 64-year-old Margaret Turbidity, who shared her story in *The Guardian* in June 2025. Margaret's family and work kept her busy, and she rarely had time to exercise. This almost resulted in her death.

In a 2024 Report, the CDC attributed 1.46 million deaths to cancer, heart disease and stroke...diseases all linked to insufficient exercise. This is a reality—as argued by the National Cancer Institute in 2022—that could be drastically mitigated with as little as 10 dedicated minutes of exercise a day. Unfortunately, for millions of Americans, gaps in coverage and access to fitness facilities leave this solution out of reach.

Thus, I am here to persuade you that Congress must amend our current health care laws to establish certified exercise programs as an Essential Health Benefit.

So today, we will examine the problems, causes, and solutions to

some of the most preventable deaths in modern society.

Let's begin with the problems.

In February 2024, Dr. Gabriel Benavidez, epidemiologist of Baylor University, estimated that 129 million Americans have a major chronic disease. Cancer, heart disease and diabetes have grown in prevalence and are expected to continue. In fact, five of the leading causes of death are strongly associated with preventable and treatable diseases.

WHO guidelines, last accessed Nov 2025, recommend 75 minutes of moderate weekly exercise and two strength training sessions per week to lower disease risks. Yet for millions of Americans, financial barriers make meeting these guidelines nearly impossible. A July 2022 CDC report reveals a harsh truth: lower-income populations often lack access to structured exercise programs, increasing their risk for chronic diseases.

While the health impacts of physical inactivity are devastating, so are the cost burdens. An August 2025 CDC report projects annual cancer treatment costs to reach \$240 billion by 2030, driven in part by rising diagnoses

linked to physical inactivity and advances in healthcare treatments. While the healthcare system is impacted by rising diagnoses, families often feel the heaviest financial strains. The American Cancer Society reported in 2025 that 47% of insured cancer survivors carry overwhelming medical debt. In 2022, Jeni Rae Peters told KFF Health News, "My doctor saved my life, and now medical bills are stealing from my children's lives." Her cancer survival buried her in debt. Without accessible, preventive exercise programs, chronic disease rates rise, treatment costs increase, and preventable deaths persist.

Now that we understand the problem and its impacts, let's examine the causes.

There are two main reasons so many Americans struggle to access structured exercise: Accessible guidance and gaps in policy.

First, the lack of accessible guidance. People need help to exercise safely and effectively. A February 2025 study by the National Library of Medicine indicates people who have the assistance of personal trainers are more likely to adhere to exercise routines and ultimately reduce disease risks. Researchers note that personal

trainers create programs around limitations, minimize injuries, and help people overcome life barriers to exercise. However, paying for this guidance without assistance can cost thousands per year. According to the National Academy of Sports Medicine—last accessed Nov 2025—personal trainers can exceed \$100 per hour varying by location and experience. Following previously cited WHO guidelines, this can quickly add up...meaning many can not afford to follow up.

Second, gaps in national policy. The Affordable Care Act, passed in 2010, lists preventive services as Essential Health Benefits but broad language leaves insurers to decide what counts as preventative care. The Department of Labor website, last accessed Nov 2025, confirms the law requires periodic updates to reflect new medical evidence but no updates are reflected based on new disease prevention guidelines. The law remains outdated, ignoring evidence that structured exercise and proper guidance prevent disease. Without clear language, insurance companies continue to treat exercise as an option instead of a preventative measure. A July 2025 Health Discovery article notes that while some private insurers offer small gym perks, these rarely reach government-subsidized patients. Coverage

often excludes structured programs and certified trainers—the very support that makes exercise safe and effective. The Department of Labor confirms insurers can still deny coverage, causing many Americans to give up on interventions that could prevent or improve disease.

Now that we understand the causes, let's move forward to a national policy solution.

We must take action at both the policy and personal levels. Congress needs to Amend the Affordable Care Act to require insurance coverage for certified exercise programs.

This would bring our healthcare policy in line with national and global health recommendations, and provide a legislative framework to require insurers to cover the WHO recommended guidelines of having at least two weekly sessions with a personal trainer. To help make this a reality, I implore you to reach out to your congressperson and advocate for this change. You can also advocate for related policy changes at the local level by contacting your local elected leaders, sharing personal health stories, and encouraging them to join you in supporting community-based programs like the YMCA—which often promotes affordable access to exercise.

And if you're a certified trainer or exercise professional, join me in

reserving a number of free or discounted sessions for seniors and financially vulnerable individuals, a small but powerful step toward closing the accessibility gap and showing that structured exercise should be available to everyone.

Today, we've examined the problems of physical inactivity and chronic disease, the causes behind them, and why amending the ACA to cover certified exercise programs is the most effective solution.

Recall Margaret Turbridy's death sentence. According to the American Cancer Society website, last accessed November 2025, she had just a 13% chance of surviving her stage 3 colon cancer diagnosis. The previously cited Guardian article tells us she desperately entered a clinical trial, incorporating a certified exercise program alongside cancer treatment plan. With a personal trainer, movement also became her medicine, helping her tolerate chemotherapy, rebuild strength, and overcome her diagnosis.

If we make access to these exercise resources a covered benefit, we can increase outcomes like Margaret's and save countless lives before disease occurs. It's time to deliver a new prescription for health, ensuring access to care for all.

WINNER: MILITARY

“Why We All Need a Battalion of Pigeons”

By Michel Reinders for David van Weel,
Minister of Justice and Security of the Netherlands



Delivered at the InCyber Forum Europe,
Lille, France, April 1, 2025

Good afternoon everyone,
Thank you for having me here in Lille... a city filled with great people and places.

One of these great places is the entrance to the Lille Zoo.

Here, you'll find a monument in honour of the 20,000 messenger pigeons who served and died during the First World War.

One of them, a pigeon called 'Le Vaillant', even posthumously received the Legion of Honour for outstanding bravery during the battle of Verdun.

There's more...

Today, the French army still has a battalion of messenger pigeons.

As a former marine officer, I've known for a long time that France has one of the strongest, most advanced armies in the world.

But the fact that you have around 200 pigeons sitting ready... just in case something truly disruptive happens... tells me you are well prepared.

That brings me to today.

When it comes to cyber security, I think we could all use some of this French attitude.

Because we should prepare for something truly disruptive.

The last years have given us enough reasons to become more vigilant.

Geopolitical tensions increasingly lead to cyber-attacks.

States like Russia and China are becoming more active in this field, while cyber criminals also continue to target digital systems.

These attacks may be aimed at states and governments... but they also threaten NGO's and businesses, especially in critical sectors such as transport, finance and energy.

According to the American insurance business Embroker the average

cost of a ransomware attack is now almost 2 million dollars.

That's an average.

Sometimes it's much higher.

For a small company, such an attack could mean bankruptcy.

Not all incidents are attacks.

Last year, for example, around 8.5 million Windows devices stopped working after an update from security software company CrowdStrike.

This disrupted hospitals, airlines and many other organisations.

It was not an attack, but a mistake.

And there are more reasons for concern.

Our critical infrastructure like roads, tunnels and bridges all depend on digital systems.

Technological developments such as quantum computers could make our current digital security obsolete.

And many countries, companies and organisations are trying to hire the few available cyber specialists in the world.

In short, when it comes to our cyber security, we are under multiple threats.

One solution would be to pull the plug and go analogue.

That would be a huge mistake.

Our societies have come a very long way from that IBM-executive in the 1940s who estimated that the world would never need more than 5 computers.

Today, there are microchips in almost everything, from pacemakers and cars to running shoes.

And all this technology has changed our lives for the better.

Digitalisation in healthcare saves lives by helping to detect diseases fast and accurately.

Translation apps make it possible to travel to a country like Japan and

communicate with everyone, without speaking a word of Japanese.

Videoconferencing has revolutionised business travel.

The list goes on and on.

Instead of going back, we should go forward.

We need to preserve the trust and openness that enables us to do business and stay connected... but in a secure, sustainable way.

How?

The answer is threefold.

To start we need awareness.

In the Netherlands, for example, we want cyber security and the seriousness of today's threat to be on everyone's mind.

And we want everyone to contribute to keeping the Netherlands digitally secure,

Knowing we're all at risk is the first step.

Knowing what to do when an incident happens comes next.

So the second thing we need to become resilient against cyberattacks is a plan.

Everyone—government, businesses and the public—should be asking: what do we do to make sure our society continues to function when a cyberattack causes a power breakdown?

When there is no internet.

When the lights go out.

To minimise the impact of a disruption, good preparation is key.

In the Netherlands we ask businesses to make sure they know who to call in case of an attack.

Whether that is a cyber security company, the police or the National Cyber Security Centre.

We also ask people to have enough water, candles and cash at home to make it through 72 hours.

And I urge everyone to think hard and make their own plan.

That brings me to the final thing we need to become more resilient: we need action.

Action to fight cyber criminals and withstand attacks.

For this, we need strength.

And since you're much stronger when you join forces, we should work together.

France, for example, helpfully shared information about how they kept the Summer Olympics secure last year.

Their best practices now help the Netherlands take action to host a safe and secure NATO summit next June.

I expect a lot from our cooperation in Europe.

The EU is investing heavily to scale and strengthen its defence system, which includes cyber security.

What's more, the EU's Cyber Resilience Act will become effective within the next two years.

These new rules protect consumers by ensuring that products that are made and sold in the EU meet our cyber security standards.

In the meantime, EU-countries are implementing the European NIS2-directive.

With these guidelines, we are asking governmental organisations and businesses to take appropriate action to become resilient to cyberattacks and to let us know when incidents happen so we can help and learn.

Pinning down the ever-changing field of cyber security in rules and regulations has been challenging, but I think we have made great progress.

We also need to guide talented young people in secondary and higher education.

This is why I'm glad France and the Netherlands are kicking off the Young Talents Cybersecurity 2025 program during this conference.

This offers young people the opportunity to work with cyber security experts and perhaps pursue a career in this field.

By doing all these things and more, we make sure people continue to trust digital products and services.

So we can move forward.

And continue to change our lives for the better.

In conclusion, I hope you will all use this Forum to meet new people, make connections and prepare for something truly disruptive...

And when you go home, I hope you will do your best to urge people to become more aware, make a plan and take action... perhaps even with the help of pigeons.

Thank you.

WINNER: NONPROFIT

"Wellspring Living Overview+Vision Speech"

By Chitara Ellis for Christian Murphy,
CEO, Wellspring Living



Delivered in Atlanta, Oct. 4, 2025

Everyone, do me a favor and hold up your right hand like you're a student trying to get your teacher's attention. Now fold your thumb into your palm like you're raising the number four. Then close your hand over your thumb like a fist. Does anyone know what this means? [pause]

This is what trafficking victims are told to do to signal for help.

But most women and children in need don't give away signals. Sometimes a victim looks like a kid from a middle-class, two-parent home. It could be a woman who was looking for a normal job finding herself trapped in a hotel room. Or a young boy sold by his foster mom to pay off a debt. Human trafficking doesn't discriminate. It doesn't stay within certain ZIP codes or

target only certain demographics. It's happening right here in Georgia—in our home.

I've been deeply committed to women and children's advocacy since 2010, which is when I first connected with Wellspring. I offered advice on fundraising for a campus expansion project, and that initial connection grew into a lasting relationship with Wellspring's founder, Mary Frances Bowley. I officially joined Wellspring in August 2022 and stepped into the CEO role early last year.

I grew up with a family that ran a funeral home, so long before my time as CEO I was surrounded by people in crisis. I saw the impact of trauma and injustice early on—especially in people who looked like me. That experience

shaped my passion for community and for standing up for those whose voices often go unheard. Whether it's advocating for children in foster care, supporting my own kids, or working for victims I may never meet, I believe this is the work I'm meant to do. God put this calling on my heart: to bring light to this issue; to help people reclaim their lives and their futures.

As Cathy Scott said, Atlanta is attractive to traffickers because of our airport. It's true that Georgia is a transportation hub of the Southeast, with major railways and airports connecting through this area. Cathy also mentioned that we have the highest income inequality of any major metropolitan city in the nation. This creates a breeding ground for exploitation through:

Extreme poverty alongside extreme wealth

Limited access to education

Insufficient therapeutic and medical care

And widespread substance abuse issues

Georgia also has broken systems of care. We have many different ways for people to be served, but these systems don't talk to each other. If you're getting mental health support at Grady Hospital, you're likely not going there for substance use issues, even though those challenges are often interconnected.

Orphanages are a thing of the past because we understand children are best served in families. Yet we're frankly not willing to do the work it takes to help children stay with their families and for those families to be stabilized. We take kids from broken homes and put them into foster care, but we never fix the broken home. The result? Children are suffering in our communities, our schools, our places of worship, and our after-school programs. We may only be seeing some of the symptoms in their behaviors, missing the signs that they're being misused and mistreated.

With all these factors combined, trafficking becomes a means for victims to secure basic needs. When that happens,

Home becomes a hotel, because it's better than sleeping under a bridge.

Home is with a pimp, so I can medicate whenever I need to.

Home becomes a scary place ... but it's the only home I know.

Wellspring Living is here to show these women and children what a real home looks like. We are closing the gaps in this broken system through a process that can be described in three pillars.

Our first pillar is Leaving the Cycle. This goes back to what Cathy said about removing anything in our lives that doesn't make a positive impact. We help survivors leave patterns of destruction and enter a process of support. Because everyone's experience is different, we honor each history and create a recovery experience based on interests, passions, and needs.

How do survivors hear about us? We have children referred to us by the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and homeless shelters. Other times they're brought in by a concerned parent or guardian. A young woman we'll call C.B. was brought to us by her mother.

When C.B. came to us, we matched her with a caseworker and then talked about her needs and dreams. We don't ask "What have you done to get into this situation?" We ask, "What do you need to move forward?" "What dreams do you have that we can achieve together?"

C.B. was then placed immediately into a secure environment, the Receiving Hope Center—Georgia's first residential intake center for trafficked youth. For C.B., Home is now safe. For 90 days, she can focus on her studies as a high school student doing classes online, while still doing some of the normal things teens do, like bake cookies, play kickball, and go out on field trips with her housemates. She met with her therapist three times a week, and also participated in family therapy with her mother to work things out. At home, she was never alone.

Which brings us to pillar two. We help survivors Join the Circle. Without a strong support system, survivors can struggle to reclaim their lives and may face the risk of re-exploitation, isolation, or distress. Staff and clinicians encircle survivors, collaborating together to provide meaningful, professional care.

I am proud to say, Wellspring provides Atlanta's best in class recovery services for survivors of human trafficking. One of our recent graduates, Kendra, drove 12 hours from another state to come to Wellspring. She was escaping a boyfriend. Every time Kendra didn't make enough money with her body to fuel his drug habit, he locked her away without food.

Kendra was very angry. She should have been angry. But she didn't want that anger to block her recovery. So during her time in our Women's Residential Program, she took classes on anger management and received

cognitive behavior therapy to, as she called it, "rewire her brain." For Kendra, Home was hard work.

But being in a community where she saw people build trust with each other modeled something she had never seen before. Kendra learned that love is not transactional; it's okay to love yourself with dignity, and love others without wanting anything in return. Home is healthy relationships.

Our final pillar, Wearing the Crown, is about hope for the future and emotional freedom. Scripture says, "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because ... that person will receive the crown of life..." C.B. and Kendra came to us at different stages with different needs, calling Wellspring their new home. But they graduate our programs the same way—wearing the crown of a hope-filled life.

C.B. recently graduated high school and wants to become a nurse. We had her shadow one of our own nurses at the Receiving Hope Center to give her basic training. Kendra now lives in stable housing, has stayed sober for 3 years, and is a student at a cosmetology school, closer than ever to achieving her dream of owning a salon and spa. [graduation photos, a picture of Kendra doing hair] For them, Home is being the best version of themselves, wherever they go.

Right now, more and more organizations are looking to Wellspring. We want to create more success stories like C.B.'s and Kendra's through our Training Institute, to help organizations across the country and around the world replicate our model, so more women and children can wear the crown.

Trafficking is getting worse, which is why we need to strengthen our model here and spread it to other organizations. Predators and buyers have greater reach to vulnerable individuals than ever before.

According to the United Nations' International Labour Organization, traffickers victimize an estimated 27.6 million people worldwide.

In the United States, plaintiffs filed 280 civil trafficking cases in 2024, the

highest number of trafficking cases filed in any year—and those are only the cases that made it to court.

Here in Georgia, The National Human Trafficking Hotline received 299 contacts from survivors and victims of human trafficking that same year, an increase of 32% from 2023.

The one moment that made me realize we're doing everything, but still need to do more, was during the holiday season. Holidays are typically difficult for program participants, especially the youth we serve. At Receiving Hope, it was one crisis after another. A family issue, a mental health emergency. We struggled to find and keep staff because of the challenging behaviors our youth were exhibiting violence, acts of aggression, verbal outbursts.

When I spoke with some of the youth about what we could do better, their responses were mixed. Some would say, "It's not you or your team. You guys are trying, we know that. It's just that—this is hard." That's true. When you're a teenager dealing with trauma, you cope the best way you can. One particular teen who was about to move to another program told me, "What you're doing has really helped me, but I still need more help."

Hearing that from a teenager the same age as my own child was powerful. It reminded me just how much these young people need, and how limited our current resources are. No single organization or individual can do this work alone. We all must do our part and contribute in some positive way. When people receive help, they do better. And when we help others, we all do better.

When I think about our work at Wellspring, I may not know what everyone needs to feel at home. But I know this: home isn't just a physical space—it's where healing begins, where dignity is restored, and where futures are rebuilt. Tonight, I want to share our bold vision that will help more women and children across Georgia say, "Home is hope."

Right now, real brick-and-mortar housing is the biggest need. Our participants need a continuum of

care that provides stability, safety, and support for the long haul. Without this extended care, too many survivors risk returning to vulnerability, exploitation, and lost potential. This is why our Welcome Home expansion campaign is already underway.

[construction images or video or drone footage]

The first building, our Cornerstone Building, will be completed this December. We're also developing cottages that remind me of "tiny homes"—spaces that build a foundation for a sustainable future. These cottages give survivors a taste of independence that many haven't experienced in years. If you only knew how life-giving it is for a survivor to decorate her own walls, to make her own memories in safety. Here, in these cottages, home is freedom.

On the youth side of this development project, Wellspring will become Georgia's first long-term program for youth of all genders. Of the estimated 27.6 million trafficked people worldwide, 22% are men and boys. Drawing on 17 years of experience working with trafficked youth, we'll create a comprehensive, healing environment where young people of any gender can reclaim their lives.

Our vision for bringing more lives home extends beyond this campus. In the past couple of years, we have significantly increased the capacity of our Training Institute. While residential care requires extensive resources and infrastructure, our training model allows us to multiply our impact. We're helping organizations across the country implement our crisis center model and learn from our five years of experience as we move into long-term care. Like consultants, we guide communities plagued by trafficking to create similar solutions for their women and children.

[show map and org logos]

We've partnered with Micah's Promise in Columbus, Street Ransom, Her Lighthouse, Prism Project, and more organizations across 20 states, in addition to Canada, Costa Rica, Germany, and Romania. Why would these organizations follow us? Because Wellspring

Living is the leader in offering paths toward healing, providing education and opportunities for advocacy, and creating safe spaces for survivors to live. There's no one else who does what we do at the scale that we do it.

To reach the millions suffering around the world, we have to start at home. To reach millions, Atlanta must lead, Georgia must lead, you must lead. Imagine with me a Georgia where every trafficking survivor finds not just shelter, but true belonging. Imagine a place where people feel so fiercely confident, so fiercely loved, so fiercely supported that they know they can find themselves again. They'll know there's a place called Wellspring where Home is restoration.

Picture the Cornerstone Building, hosting GED classes and life skills workshops for survivors ready to build an independent life. Or a mother, tucking her kids away at bedtime in their new cottage—their first home. A young boy playing kickball with his friends outside, free from his abusers. Kendra welcoming her first client into her salon. C.B. getting up early in the morning, putting on her scrubs to serve at the hospital downtown.

Think about Georgia being the standard bearer for the nation—our training model creating a network of healing that reaches into every community.

How many of us have gone through Hartsfield-Jackson and heard the mayor say over the announcements, "Atlanta is the pride of the South"? This message plays right after another that tells us to keep our eyes open for the signs of human trafficking. It highlights a truth we can't ignore: Even in a place known for its progress and promise, the suffering of women and children proliferates in its shadows.

If we truly want to live up to the title "pride of the South," for our city and state, then we must ensure that pride is rooted in compassion. Being proud of our home means protecting everyone in it, especially those who are most vulnerable. Georgia is home, so let's make sure all our women and children feel that way.

[overview video plays]

WINNER: CONTROVERSIAL OR HIGHLY POLITICIZED TOPICS

“The Last Legal Form of Slavery”

Written and delivered by Cecily Mundo



Delivered at
Modesto Junior College, Modesto, California, Nov. 17, 2025

At the height of the Covid pandemic, Samuel Brown was part of a sanitation team. However, he did not receive hazard pay or proper protective equipment despite suffering from asthma. This made him especially vulnerable to the virus. When he raised concerns and attempted to quit his sanitation job altogether his supervisor told him “No.” As CBS reported in February 2023, Samuel Brown was not a free worker. You see, he was part of a prison sanitation crew. Brown was (and still is) subject to the last legal form of slavery in the United States.

Of course, Samuel Brown is just one example. A 2025 article by the Economic Policy Institute states that nearly 800,000 people in the U.S. are prison laborers.

There is an urgent need to end slave labor in U.S. prisons. First, we’ll examine the history of forced labor; second, we’ll dissect who benefits from the practice; and finally, we’ll discuss our role in abolishing this system. Because even though many Americans still say “do the crime, do the time,” forced labor without choice, pay, or protection is not justice. It’s exploitation.

Let’s begin by learning about the roots of forced prison labor.

The seed of this injustice is planted in the U.S. Constitution. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery but left behind a perilous loophole. It reads, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime...shall exist within the United States.” This loophole became the foundation for forced prison labor. Following the Civil War, lawmakers swiftly passed “Black Codes,” laws which the National Constitution Center explains were “specifically designed to...restore much of the slave system that had

existed prior to the war.” As the 2016 Netflix documentary 13th illustrates, these codes criminalized Black Americans for minor offenses. For example, “vagrancy” laws allowed for a person’s arrest if they were unemployed and did not have a permanent residence.

The result? This funneled Black individuals into the prison system, where they were leased to private companies—a practice that Ellen Terrel, author of a 2021 article for the Library of Congress, calls “convict leasing.”

A 2022 report from the ACLU explains that this practice continues today, writing that “incarcerated individuals produce...\$2 billion in goods and...over \$9 billion a year in services.”

Hundreds of thousands of people are crushed by the gears of prison profit. Take Richard Lilgrose. He told NPR in 2023 that his PTSD made it extremely challenging to work in the high stress environment of the prison kitchen. After asking multiple times for permission to quit, his request was finally granted...only to be placed in a unit that drastically limited his yard time and allotted one hour of phone calls a week. Restrictions like these are usually reserved for extreme infractions. In Richard’s case, it was used to punish him for trying to protect his mental health.

Now that we understand the history of forced prison labor, let’s look at who benefits.

There are two key stakeholders who benefit from forced labor: corporations and prisons themselves.

First, the corporate advantages are staggering. Prison labor is cheap. There’s no healthcare to pay for, no threat of unions, no vacation days, no sick leave. The Malta Justice Initiative last accessed August 8, 2025 reports

that companies like Walmart, McDonalds, American Airlines, and others all use prison labor to keep production costs low.

Corporations aren’t the only ones with an advantage. Prisons themselves turn a profit. People held in these facilities require food, clothing, and medical care. Talk about a capitalist fever dream. The aforementioned article from the Economic Policy Institute explains that the South illustrates these dynamics most starkly, with Black men incarcerated at the highest rates worldwide and often made to work without compensation.

Alabama makes for a striking example. According to Business and Human Rights Resource Center last updated in December of 2024, Alabama siphons 40% of incarcerated workers’ wages and charges them 5 dollars a day for transportation to and from work. Whatever pennies remain go toward the prison commissary, where prices are inflated “five times higher” according to a 2024 investigation by The Appeal.

In other words, the prison system is a hungry beast that will devour everything we feed it: our people’s physical health, their mental health, and their humanity.

Yes—laws get broken.

Yes—people hurt others.

And yes—there is a better way to deal with these realities.

So what does that look like in practice? We’ve explored how the 13th Amendment allowed slave labor to continue and how profit continues to drive it today. Next, we’ll look at how to bring this system to an end by confronting both prison slavery and the prison industrial complex.

First, we must pursue concrete steps to end prison labor. Samuel Brown,

whose story you heard at the beginning of this speech, worked with Assemblywoman Lori D. Wilson on Proposition 6 in 2024. Proposition 6 would have amended the California constitution to prohibit involuntary servitude. And although this proposition was only introduced in California, this is a solution that could be enacted nationwide. Unfortunately, the measure failed, but this shouldn't discourage future efforts. An Article published with Cal Matters in November of 2024 states that a lack of direct language and public education around the proposition contributed to its failure. Cayla Mihovich, the author of the article, argues that with updated language and better public understanding, we can pass this change in 2026. And this can become the framework for a change on the federal level. Support these efforts by contacting your local representatives. Stress the importance of passing the constitutional amendment to end involuntary servitude.

Additionally, speak with your wallet. Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson argues in his 1933 book *The Miseducation of the Negro*, that African Americans often support institutions that don't have their best interest in mind. But this lesson is useful for all of us. Don't give your money to companies that use slave labor. McDonalds, Walmart, and others speak the language of profit. That's why boycotts work—because money talks. Just

look at Disney: following the boycott after the suspension of “Jimmy Kimmel Live!” Yahoo Finance reports that their streaming cancellations doubled leading to the corporation to reinstate the program.

However, these steps are not the end—they're necessary first steps. Angela Davis states in her 2003 book, *Are Prisons Obsolete* that once upon a time “the belief in the permanence of slavery was so widespread that even white abolitionists found it difficult to imagine Black people as equal.” However, she writes, “popular attitudes shift...in response to organized social movements.” So, we need to organize. Movements already exist—not just to end prison slave labor, but to abolish the prison system entirely.

For example, Critical Resistance is an organization backed by Angela Davis with chapters across the country. The organization focuses on four key aspects: prisoner solidarity, political education, fighting imprisonment, and resisting policing. I am a proud member of Critical Resistance. We embody the Black Panther message of action over rhetoric. One way we do this is facilitating workshops to educate the public about the prison system and their rights. We also build community through the Prisoner Solidarity mailing program. Volunteers like myself spend a few evenings a month answering letters from people who are

in prison. These letters offer support. Sometimes this looks like getting them in contact with a lawyer and other times it's emotional support to remind them that they are not alone.

You can be part of these efforts. This handout will lead you to my website, where you can find more information about forced labor; how to contact your representative; a list of companies that we ALL should be boycotting and how to support organizations like Critical Resistance.

Samuel Brown and Richard Lilgrose are just two of the millions that have suffered from forced prison labor. First, we examined the history of this practice. Then, we identified how corporations and prisons benefit. Finally, we discussed solutions that are both aspirational and actionable. Even with my personal activism, I cannot stand here and say I have all the right solutions. Who of us really does, in the span of ten minutes? But I can say that with consistency and patience, we can make a difference.

Frederick Douglass once said: “there is no man under the canopy of heaven that doesn't know that slavery is wrong.” Under that canopy, Samuel Brown still waits for justice. Richard Lilgrose still waits for dignity. Every day that we hesitate, the system wins. Boycott. Vote. Demand change—until this last form of slavery is gone.

WINNER: DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

“It’s Time for the “Reference Man” to Retire”

By Johan Kroes for Elanor Boekholt-O’Sullivan, Minister for Housing and Spatial Planning of the Netherlands

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Delivered to the European Parliament, March 6, 2025

Members of the European Parliament, ladies and gentlemen,

In recent years, this Parliament has worked hard to ensure that women have an equal role within defence organisations and within the wider security policy.

Thanks to your efforts, important steps have been taken.

But there is still a long way to go.

This can also be said of the Netherlands.

Almost 45 years ago, the Netherlands armed forces implemented drastic changes:

Women were granted access, right across the board.

We could fly, sail, and fight.

A milestone in our military history.

We gained equal ranks, equal positions, equal opportunities.

But never true equality.

Because taking part meant having to adapt.

Having to adapt to a system that was never designed for us.

A system in which the “standard soldier”—a man, 1.80 metres tall with broad shoulders—was the benchmark or reference for everything.

From policy to equipment, from training to decision-making.

So yes, the door may have been opened for us.

But the doorway was still designed for someone else.

And that’s why today, I say:

It’s time for the “reference man” to retire.

He’s had a long, glorious career, but it’s high time for a fresh perspective.

It’s time for policies that no longer exclude women.

Because as long as the benchmark standard soldier is still a man—in policy, training, and equipment—we

will keep shaping armed forces that exclude rather than include.

Uniformity is in our DNA.

It provides structure, clarity, and cohesion.

But uniformity should never mean losing yourself just to fit in.

And unfortunately, that’s exactly what I see all around me.

Women who say:

“I’m one of the guys now.”

No! That’s not the goal.

You should be able to proudly say: “I’m one of the girls.”

And that distinction should never call into question your competence, leadership skills, or your role in the team.

We have to stop forcing women to fit into a system that was never made for them.

Why?

Because the world around us has made it abundantly clear: a strong military is essential.

We need more men, yes.

But also: many more women.

Not just in the Netherlands, but across all European armed forces.

Not because of a quota, but because we simply can’t do without.

And yet, the number of women joining the military remains far too low.

Last year, I commissioned a survey on how women perceive the armed forces.

The results? Crystal clear.

Women respect the military, but they don’t see themselves working for a military organisation.

Not because they don’t want to, but because they don’t know where they would fit in.

Where men often get excited just at the sight of a fighter jet or a navy frigate, women ask different questions:

“Where would that ship take me? What will I be doing there?”

If we don’t address the specific information needs of women, we unconsciously risk excluding a large group of potential recruits.

Not because we mean to, but because of a lack of imagination.

And this issue goes beyond just communication.

Take our equipment for instance.

For years, our body armour was a perfect fit... for a man who is 1.80 metres tall with broad shoulders.

For a woman? Its fit was closer to a crushing corset than a piece of gear.

Only recently have we introduced equipment that better fits women’s bodies.

This is a European issue: countries such as Romania are taking the initiative to develop tailor-made body armour.

And cooperation within the EU can speed up this process.

Or consider the design of our ships.

When we asked our female naval personnel and engineers to contribute ideas for our ships, they came up with smart, practical improvements.

Increased comfort. Better layouts. Smarter spaces.

And guess what?

Those improvements?

The men wanted them too.

Not because the ship became less operational, but because it was simply better designed.

More efficient. More logical. More comfortable.

Inclusive policy is not “women’s policy.”

It’s just good policy.

No debate.

So, this is the central point of my message:

We have to stop forcing women to fit into a system that was never built for them.

Instead, we need to build a system that works for everyone.

Uniformity should never lead to exclusion.

And this change doesn't stop with our own organizations.

The EU has always supported UN Resolution 1325.

Let's push forward with real commitment.

As a shared responsibility for all member states.

Women play a crucial role in conflict prevention and security.

Not as an afterthought, but as an essential part of lasting peace and stability.

And yet, women remain under-represented in the decision-making process.

They may be given a seat at the table, but they don't always have a voice.

They are there at the table, but they don't always have influence.

I've experienced it myself.

In Afghanistan, I once had a meeting with representatives of the Ministry of Transport.

But they didn't want to talk to me. They asked for a man to speak on my behalf.

I was there, but I didn't count.

That moment showed me just how deeply rooted this problem is.

Not just within organisations, but in the way decisions are made worldwide.

Even if women are physically present, this doesn't mean that they count.

And that is exactly why the presence of women in conflict zones and peace processes isn't enough.

They need to be able to exercise real influence.

Not because it's "fair," but because they make up half of society.

Because they bring unique perspectives and solutions to the table.

Because without them, we miss opportunities.

Members of the European Parliament,

The choice is ours—and yours.

The armed forces need people.

More so than ever before.

We simply cannot afford to waste talent.

But that's exactly what we're doing, as long as we design policies around just one standard.

Today, I have a simple request: Retire the "reference man."

The EU is working towards greater gender equality in the defence domain.

But we need to move faster to make a real difference.

So with every decision that you take ask yourself:

Who was this system designed for?

And even more critically:

Who are we, albeit perhaps unintentionally, leaving out?

This is not just about women.

It's about building a military that also appeals to those who don't yet feel drawn to the organisation.

It's about anyone who wonders: could this be the right place for me?

The answer to that question should never be "maybe."

It should always be resounding "yes."

Because only armed forces that truly work for all can unlock the full power of our society.

Inclusion is not a luxury.

It is a strategic necessity.

Our security depends on it.

Thank you.

WINNER: ECONOMICS

"r in the Monetary Policy Universe: Navigational Star or Dark Matter?"*

By André Schmidt for Dr Joachim Nagel,
President of the Deutsche Bundesbank



Delivered at the London School of Economics and Political Science,
London, Feb. 12, 2025

Ladies and gentlemen,
First, I would like to thank the LSE and OMFIF for inviting me. It's a pleasure and an honour for me to speak here before such a distinguished audience.

"Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet." This was advice from Stephen Hawking, the famous English physicist and author of numerous books on the cosmos. And who would want to contradict the genius?

So today I invite you to join me on a stargazing tour. If you don't have a telescope with you, no worries. However, I should add a disclaimer here: When a couple look up at the stars, things could get romantic. When astronomers observe the stars, impressive images can come into view. When economists talk about stars, it usually gets complicated. Now you know what you're getting into!

I'm sure you've already guessed what topic I have in mind: the natural

rate of interest - also known as r-star. It is a concept that economists have been grappling with for more than 125 years. And it has perhaps never received more attention than in the current era of monetary policy.

From a central banker's perspective, I would like to discuss what role r-star can and should play in the monetary policy universe. I will structure my lecture around four key questions: What is r-star and why is it of interest for monetary policy? How have estimates for

r-star evolved over the past decades? What drives uncertainty about current estimates and the future evolution of r-star? What conclusions should monetary policy draw from this?

Let's start with the definition. The natural rate is the real interest rate that would prevail if the economy were operating at its potential and prices were stable. R-star is commonly thought to be driven by real forces that structurally affect the balance between saving and investment. Think of technological progress and demographics, for example. This also means that r-star should, by definition, be independent of monetary policy. The latter follows from the widely held belief that monetary policy can affect real variables only temporarily, but is neutral in the long term.

At first glance, the natural rate could be a guiding star for the conduct of monetary policy. If a central bank sets its policy rates so that the real interest rate is above r-star, monetary policy is restrictive or "tight". Consequently, economic activity slows and the inflation rate should decrease. If the real rate is below r-star, monetary policy is expansionary or "loose". It provides incentives for consumers to purchase more and for enterprises to step up investment and output. Hence, this should result in more economic activity and a higher inflation rate.

However, the idea of the natural rate serving as a guiding star for monetary policy comes with profound challenges. Perhaps the name r-star evokes associations with astronomy and navigation. But these would be misleading. If r-star were like a star in the sky, it would be relatively easy to locate. Stars emit light and are therefore observable.

The natural rate is a theoretical concept. It is based on a hypothetical state of the world. That means the natural rate is, by nature, unobservable. It can only be estimated. For example, models use assumptions about the relationship between measurable variables and r-star. In this respect, the natural rate is not so much like a star shining brightly in the sky. It is more a case of dark

matter. Dark matter does not emit, absorb, or reflect light, making it invisible.

Physicists introduced dark matter to make their models fit what they see. Stars at the edges of galaxies spin faster than visible matter and standard gravity can explain. If we assume there is invisible dark matter adding extra gravity, those speeds make sense. From the stars' speeds and the visible matter, they can even estimate how much dark matter there is.

Economists do something similar with the natural rate of interest. When growth is close to potential and inflation is stable, the policy rate should be close to the natural rate. Using what we can observe—growth, prices, and the policy rate—we infer something we cannot see directly: the natural rate.

If something is hard to find, it only spurs researchers to look even harder—whether they are astronomers or economists. Therefore, we can draw on a variety of estimation methods for the evolution of the natural rate.

Since around the 1980s various estimates of different types have been pointing to a downward trend for r-star over several decades and across many advanced economies. In the wake of the global financial crisis, the estimates slumped to exceptionally low levels. This development was roughly in line with the observed trajectory of actual real interest rates of short- and long-term government bonds during this period. And no wonder: In the long run, both should be driven by the same fundamental forces affecting the balance between saving and investment.

So the question is this: what has lifted saving and depressed investment? A simple answer would be: in the long term, the most important driver is potential growth. But this finding is not very enlightening. Potential growth is also not observable. It is determined by underlying forces such as demographics and technological progress. This is where we need to look for the causes.

Indeed, according to a number of recent studies, waning productivity growth and population ageing were the key factors in pushing saving up and

investment down. Lower productivity reduces the return on investment, so people are less willing to invest. As they expect to live longer, they are more willing to save.

In addition, inequality, risk aversion and fiscal policy could be other factors. For example, growing inequality raises saving, as richer households save a larger share of their income. Similarly, higher risk aversion leads to higher saving, especially in safe assets, while lowering investment.

Many of the estimates for r-star reached their lowest point in the pandemic years 2020 and 2021. After that, there were signs of a partial reversal. A recent analysis by Eurosystem economists across a suite of models and data up to the end of 2024 suggests that estimates of r-star range from $-1/2\%$ to $1/2\%$ in real terms. In nominal terms, they find that it ranges between $1\frac{3}{4}\%$ and $2\frac{1}{4}\%$.

It is clear that these ranges depend on the estimating approaches considered. Taking into account an even wider array of measures, Bundesbank staff calculations using data up to the end of 2024 reveal a range of 1.8% to 2.5%. And the ECB found for the third quarter of 2024: When three estimates derived from versions of the Holston-Laubach-Williams model are factored in, the range of real r-star is $-1/2\%$ to 1% and the nominal range is $1\frac{3}{4}\%$ to 3%.

All in all, the results suggest that the range of r-star estimates most likely increased by about one percentage point from their lows. The latest estimates by economists from the Bank for International Settlements come to similar findings.

The reasons for the increase after the pandemic are not yet fully clear. For example, high fiscal spending with rising public debt levels could play a role. Or higher needs for capital, as companies make their value chains more resilient by duplicating structures and increasing stock levels.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Stargazing tours in economics are a journey into the uncertain. This is also

and especially true for r -star. Estimates of the natural rate of interest are subject to major uncertainties, shaped by three M's: megatrends, methodology and monetary policy.

First, we are facing a number of megatrends. Think of climate change, ageing societies, digitalisation, and the risks of de-globalisation and increasing geopolitical divisions. The effects of these megatrends on natural rates are difficult to gauge and may change over time.

On the one hand, they could contribute to a higher natural rate. Here are some examples: The widespread uptake of artificial intelligence could boost productivity growth. The green transition could lead to higher investment. Fiscal deficits could persist at an elevated level due to higher defence spending given geopolitical tensions. The entry of the baby boomer generation into retirement could reduce savings.

On the other hand, life expectancy is predicted to keep rising; the high hopes for the productivity-enhancing effect of AI could turn out to be too optimistic; and given high public debt levels, fiscal space for additional spending is limited in many countries. Overall, it is virtually impossible to predict which developments will prevail in affecting r -star.

The second factor of uncertainty is methodology. The methods used to define and estimate r -star differ in important ways, especially in terms of time and risk.

Ricardo Reis demonstrates this impressively in a recent paper. He presents four different “ r -stars”. They are based on four different conceptual approaches. And they developed quite differently between 1995 and 2019.

One major difference is the risk dimension. Knut Wicksell's original definition of the natural rate was the rate of return on physical capital in equilibrium. The rate of return on physical capital is the return on investment in the real economy. And this rate is very much associated with risks.

However, this perspective has been lost in virtually all of the model ap-

proaches. Generally, they use rather secure government bond yields as a starting point. Again, with regard to the real economy, a risky return on capital would be a more appropriate yardstick. When we look at measures for the return on private capital, we see a strong contrast with risk-free rates. Returns on private capital have remained broadly stable over the last decades in the US, Germany and the euro area as a whole.

From these observations, Ricardo Reis draws the following conclusion: “focusing exclusively on the return on government bonds as the measure of r -star, while neglecting the return on private capital, leads to the wrong policy advice.”

Another case in point is the time horizon that is considered. Commonly cited estimates seek to assess the real rate that prevails in the longer run, when all shocks have dissipated. Most of these estimates are highly imprecise. Many methods simply project the current or the historical level of real rates into the future. This may confound permanent trends with cyclical factors, which may not be representative for the future. As a result, such methods could miss important turning points in real rate trends.

Other approaches characterise a short-run real rate in a hypothetical world without frictions. While interesting, this concept is of limited value for actual policymaking in the real world. Methods based on a short-term equilibrium tend to produce more volatile estimates of r -star.

There is a third reason for caution: monetary policy itself may play a role in shaping the natural rate or its estimates. A number of studies challenge the view that money is neutral in the long run.

There are different channels through which monetary policy could have lasting effects on real interest rates. Prolonged tight monetary policy, for example, may lower investment, innovation and productivity growth. By contrast, persistent monetary easing could fuel financial imbalances and contribute to zombification.

Moreover, recent research suggests that central bank announcements provide guidance about the trend in real rates. For instance, a narrow window around Fed meetings captures most of the trend decline in US real long-term yields since 1980. This could mean: when central banks look for r -star in financial market prices, they might actually be looking in a mirror. Feedback loops between monetary policy and markets could unduly reinforce their perceptions about r -star. And shifts in perceived r -star could affect actual r -star as it influences saving and investment decisions.

Against the backdrop of these major uncertainties, the final key question of my speech is this: what role can and should r -star play for monetary policy in practice?

Let's approach the answer with a thought experiment: Put yourself in the shoes of a monetary policymaker who only looks at r -star. The relevant interest rate with which you steer the monetary policy stance is currently 2.75%. After a previous series of interest rate cuts, you consider whether a further cut would be appropriate.

Your staff inform you that various point estimates of r -star range from around 1.8% to 2.5% in nominal terms. If r -star were at the upper end of the estimates, the policy rate would become neutral with the next rate cut. Things would be different if r -star were at the lower end of the estimates: Monetary policy would continue to be restrictive, even after several further rate cuts.

So how would you proceed, given a certain stance you want to achieve? Beware: If you rely on a wrong estimate, your decision may have a different effect on inflation than you intended. Simply choosing the middle of the range might not be a happy medium. Around the point estimates, there are often uncertainty bands of different sizes and with asymmetries.

As you have probably guessed: It is no coincidence that I have described this particular decision-making situation. It looks similar in the euro area ahead of the next monetary policy

meeting of the ECB Governing Council at the beginning of March. After several rate cuts, the neutral rate could already be near—or there may still be some way to go.

The President of the New York Fed, John Williams, put the problem in a nutshell when he said: “as we have gotten closer to the range of estimates of neutral, what appeared to be a bright point of light is really a fuzzy blur.”

The bottom line here is this: The closer we get to the neutral rate, the more appropriate it becomes to take a gradual approach. For this purpose, r-star is a helpful concept: it indicates when we need to be more cautious with policy rate moves so that we don’t take a wrong step.

At the same time, the limits of the concept are also clear: it would be risky to base decisions mainly on r-star estimates. Much more is needed to assess the current monetary policy stance and the optimal policy path for the near future.

That is why the Eurosystem uses a variety of financial, real economic and other indicators along the monetary policy transmission mechanism. We want the fullest picture possible. And, of course, r-star also has a place in this

picture. For instance, r-star is included in model-based optimal policy projections that we use in the decision-making process.

In my opinion, proceeding in a data-driven and gradual manner has served the ECB Governing Council well.

There is no reason to act hastily in the present uncertain environment. The data will tell us where we need to go.

Away from day-to-day monetary policymaking, the concept of the natural rate of interest provides a useful framework. This is also exemplified in the policy scenarios that Ricardo Reis presented last week in Brussels.

He works with the assumption that government bond rates remain around current levels. I would add the assumption that inflation stays on target—actually, that is what I am in office for and committed to. Assuming output is at capacity, policy rates would be persistently higher than in the past. But the recommendations on actual monetary policy depend on the driving forces: is the new setting caused by less demand for safe and liquid assets or by an increase in productivity? And he has two more scenarios in his paper!

That provides a good example of why we should take a close look at the

factors behind r-star estimates. Here it is important to even better understand the forces that are shifting real interest rate trends. We need to find out how these forces and trends affect our work to ensure price stability.

Reviewing our monetary policy strategy from time to time is therefore vital. That is precisely what we are doing right now in the Eurosystem. And, of course, in this process, we look at all the questions I mentioned about r-star.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our stargazing tour is drawing to a close. It turns out we were dealing more with dark matter than with a shining star. Just as dark matter is an exciting field for astronomers, r-star is a rewarding topic for economists.

Using r-star alone to navigate the monetary policy universe could be like flying almost blind. But having it as one of many instruments in your cockpit is highly useful.

I would like to end by quoting Stephen Hawking again: “Mankind’s greatest achievements have come about by talking, and its greatest failures by not talking.” So I’m looking forward to our discussion now!

WINNER: ENVIRONMENT/ENERGY/SUSTAINABILITY

“From Reaction to Readiness: Firetech and the Future of Wildfire Response”

By Nicole Lowenbraun for
Sonia Kastner, CEO, PanoAi



Delivered at the Aspen Ideas Festival,
Aspen, Colorado, June 27, 2025

When we talk about wildfires, we use certain phrases:

“It was a force of nature.”

“It moved like lightning.”

“There was nothing we could’ve done.”

We use these phrases, because that’s how it FEELS. When homes are reduced to ash, when smoke fills the sky, when a town evacuates in minutes, it feels like something bigger than us...

An unstoppable act of God.

Over time, that language starts to do something dangerous. It implies we’re powerless. That our only job is to keep responding the same way we always have, even as fires get bigger, faster, and more destructive.

The truth is, we’re not up against something unstoppable or the divine. Yes, our landscapes are drier, our forests are overgrown, and climate change makes everything faster, hotter, and

harder to predict. But those conditions are more catastrophic... because of the way we’re managing fire.

We’re still relying on outdated equipment, slow coordination, and reactive thinking. And THAT’S the part we can change. When we label these events “acts of God,” we let ourselves off the hook. We miss the opportunity to adapt, invest, and innovate. And we simply can’t afford to do that any longer.

The good news is, we don't have to...

We now have a multitude of new approaches for tackling every stage of the wildfire lifecycle. From prevention and preparedness to response and recovery. Today, I'm zooming in on one part of that trend: firetech.

Not because technology is the whole story—it's not. Many of the new strategies are as low tech as a herd of goats that eat flammable leaves. But tech is the world I come from. And right now, it's an area with VERY exciting progress. Before I tell you more, allow me to introduce myself...

I'm Sonia Kastner, the CEO and co-founder of Pano AI. I founded Pano with my old friend Arvind Satyam. He and I had both spent years in the tech sector, specifically smart-home and internet of things. Between the two of us, we had built and deployed dozens of products that integrated hardware, software, and Artificial Intelligence.

For example, in 2014, I worked at Nest on the Nestcam, one of the first AI-enabled smart cameras. And during his time at CISCO, Arvind helped wire up entire smart cities like Barcelona and Copenhagen. Then, in 2020, Arvind and I came across an executive order from the State of California that explicitly called upon the private sector to generate "innovative ideas" to support wildfire mitigation.

We were shocked to learn that first responders were being sent into fast-moving wildfires with almost no visibility, no real-time data, not even a shared map. To us, this didn't feel like an insurmountable problem. It felt familiar. A real-world challenge that modern day technology could address. Arvind and I looked at the current state of tools for fire professionals and thought "We can do better than this". And that's why we started Pano.

You already know wildfires are a major problem, but it's probably worse than you think. Here are a few facts that might surprise you:

- The recent 2025 LA wildfires destroyed over 16,000 structures, causing \$250 billion in economic losses.

- In the western US, the vapor pressure deficit, a measure of how thirsty the air is, has increased by 70%. It's increasing as a square of temperature rise.

- Wildfire isn't just a problem in western states. In 2025 alone, there have already been destructive wildfires in Oklahoma, New Jersey, and Minnesota.

- Urban conflagrations, which were all but eliminated by the 1930s, have returned. Fires are starting in city open spaces, not just remote forests.

In short...the conditions are getting worse at an alarming rate and the tools are not keeping up.

In addition to facing physical dangers and smoke inhalation,

- Firefighters are also nearly three times more likely to experience PTSD than the general population. (Serve & Protect)

- They face depression rates 57% higher and suicide rates 72% higher than average

- Divorce rates are over 30% higher for firefighters than the population as a whole.

We praise our firefighters for their bravery. But we owe them more than praise. We owe them better tools before they ever hit the front lines. At Pano, we're working to address one very specific gap: providing actionable intelligence in the critical early moments of a fire, often when it's smaller than 10 acres. Think of it like a NestCam for the forest.

We install ultra-high-definition cameras on high vantage points, like cell towers. We rotate the cameras every minute and upload the data to the cloud, while also ingesting satellite data and other useful feeds. We then run proprietary AI algorithms to detect new fire ignitions within minutes.

Each AI detection is confirmed by a human analyst using the camera footage and then we push out alerts with location information and rich imagery to a wide array of fire professionals simultaneously. This allows them to have a common operating picture and coordinate an aggressive response in

minutes, so they can contain the fire while it is still small.

Now, you might think that fire detection is a simple AI problem, but it's not. Wildfires are relatively rare, and never look the same twice. They break out at different time of day, in many kinds of weather and terrain. Fortunately, over the last 5 years, Pano's machine learning team has trained our models to handle that complexity.

It starts with our rich dataset: over 1B images spanning 3 countries, capturing countless fire types, terrains, and conditions. And we don't rely on off the shelf models. We've built multiple custom AI models: for detecting smoke during the day, and heat at night, using both satellites and our own cameras.

We intentionally set our AI thresholds low to catch even the faintest hints of smoke. That means more AI detections, but instead of alerting on everyone, we first leverage a human-in-the-loop review to filter out dust, clouds, and other false positives. We have found that combining artificial intelligence with human intelligence yields the fastest and most accurate performance. Let me give you one example of Pano's early detection solution in action...

On a 90 degree July day in Oregon's Yamhill County, our system detected the first wisps of smoke from what would become the Kutch Road Fire. We issued an alert 14 minutes before the first 911 call came in. The Pano alert included precise coordinates and high-resolution imagery, allowing fire crews to respond swiftly. The 911 call, on the other hand, was vague and didn't provide the location or severity of the fire. Thanks to our intel, first responders reached the fire while it was still small, contained it to two acres, and prevented it from becoming a major disaster.

One fire chief told us, "If it had not been for Pano, we would still be battling this fire days later."

I'm proud to report that Pano AI is already delivering its solution at scale, thanks to fast adoption by companies like Xcel Energy and Southern Cross

Forests, as well as government agencies like the Washington State Department of Natural Resources. In the last 5 years alone...

- Pano has deployed hundreds of camera systems across 10 US States, 5 States in Australia, and BC Canada
- Last fire season, we detected 435 confirmed vegetation fires
- We've onboarded thousands of fire professionals onto our software platform
- We've signed over \$100M of customer contracts
- And we're currently monitoring over 30 million acres of land

Pano has become a mature company with a proven, commercial-grade solution. But that wasn't always the case...

I wouldn't be standing here today if it weren't for Fire Chief, Rick Balentine of the Aspen Fire Protection District. He had the forward-thinking vision to install the first Pano camera systems in the company's history, in June of 2021.

This experimental product fundamentally changed the way the department operates. They now have real visibility before arriving on scene, resulting in fewer unnecessary deployments and more protection for both people and resources.

Chief Balentine, along with Aspen philanthropist Jerry Hosier, who funded the program, took a chance on us - a new start-up. They knew someone had to take that first risk in order for innovation to flourish. So Chief Balentine, Jerry Hosier [please stand up] from me, Arvind, and the whole firetech community: thank you.

I'm excited to share that Pano is just one example of the firetech innovation explosion. There are now over 500 organizations building firetech. That's up from just 10 when Arvind and I founded Pano in 2020! These solutions range from detecting a tree falling on power lines before a fire starts, to predicting where fuel reduction can have the biggest impact. There's even

non-toxic retardant that can be used in smart and impactful ways.

You're probably wondering, "if all this amazing tech exists, why haven't I heard of it?" Here's the truth: It's not the innovation that's lacking. It's the adoption. We can't just rely on innovative early adopters like Aspen and Xcel Energy. We need firetech to go mainstream. Local, State and Federal agencies must embrace technology wholeheartedly.

Let me be clear: we will never stop every wildfire. There will always be lightning. There will always be wind.

But in the world we're building, we don't wait until the sky turns orange to act. Fire doesn't catch us off guard. If we do this right, the next generation won't all these events "acts of God." Instead, they'll inherit better tools, better systems, and a clearer plan for facing fire head-on. We can't prevent every spark. But we can stop pretending we didn't see it coming.

WINNER: FUTURE OF THE WORKPLACE

"Why Being a 'Good Listener' at Work Isn't Enough"

By Maegan Stephens for Maegan Stephens and Nicole Lowenbraun, VP, Comms and Marketing & Program Director, respectively, at Duarte

Delivered at TED@BCG, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Oct. 23, 2025

Maegan: Have you ever wanted to say to your boss, "Stop talking! You're not listening to me!"

Nicole: I've actually said that. To her face.

Maegan: Yep. I'm her boss. And obviously, I didn't fire her.

Nicole: We were locked away in a rental house on a writing retreat, all outta snacks, behind on the deadline for our very first book...about listening. So, you know... a super low-stress situation.

Maegan: I wanted us to make up time and hit our writing goal for the day.

Nicole: And I wanted to fix the section we'd just written because it wasn't good enough. But every time I brought

it up, Maegan rushed past it. Until finally, I snapped: "Stop talking! You're not listening to me!"

Maegan: Ok now of course I was listening. I wasn't scrolling on my phone or multitasking. But there was something I wasn't doing, and it took us three years of researching the way great leaders, managers, and colleagues listen, to figure it out.

Nicole: We asked the question, "what makes someone a great listener at work?" Across dozens of interviews, people said things like, "My manager is a great listener because she gets just as excited about my big wins as I do."

Maegan: "My work-wife is a great listener because she knows when to tell

me to stop whining and get back to work." When we wrote all the answers on brightly colored sticky notes, spread them out on the dining room table, and grouped them together, it hit us:

Nicole: It's not that people weren't listening at work. It's that there's more than one way to be a great listener at work. Great listeners flex, they shift, they adapt what's going through their heads and what they say back... because yes, responding is absolutely part of listening.

Maegan: And anyone can learn to be a great listener. You just need to stop listening the way you want, and start listening the way they need. We call it Adaptive Listening, and when you do

it, you build more trust at work, you get better results, and you get them faster. And you can start doing it right now.

Nicole: Some of you might be thinking, “Wait, don’t you mean active listening?” Not quite. Don’t get us wrong, active listening is valuable. But it was created in the 1950’s for therapists and counselors—not for a busy back-to-back workday with constant meetings, pings, talking up, down, across, virtually and in-person...

Maegan: Work happens a lot faster than therapy. You can trust us on that. And the interruptions are constant. But it’s the goals that are the biggest difference between active and Adaptive Listening. At work, every time someone talks to you, they have a goal they’re trying to achieve. Whether it’s a mid-week sync, a quarterly update, or morning small talk—they’re always trying to meet a goal.

Nicole: Now don’t worry, there aren’t infinite goals for you to learn. Adaptive Listening narrows it down to just four. And the first one might surprise you, because it doesn’t sound like the “active listening” you might be used to. It’s called Discern Listening, and here’s how it plays out:

Maegan: I was once coaching an executive before his big main stage keynote. During his rehearsal, there were 17 other people in that room... and not one of them spoke up when the exec used this phrase 22 times in his talk—I counted, “It’s not just X... it’s Y!” Like, “it’s not just speed, it’s unlocking potential.”

Nicole: Now, Maegan and I LOVE contrast framing as a writing tool, but she was concerned that people would assume AI wrote his talk. Because all over social media at the time people were freaking out about that: “AI is overusing contrast framing!”

Maegan: And when I said just that, this executive looked down and said, “Yeah...I did have AI write this talk.” So good thing for him and his team I was using Discern Listening!

Nicole: Sometimes at work, you have to evaluate and critique. If you don’t, the product could flop, the campaign

could fail, the client relationship could fracture. But if that type of listening makes you feel uneasy, that’s ok. The second goal might be more comfortable: We call it Immerse Listening.

Maegan: Think back to your first week at your job, when you went through orientation. You heard about the mission, the org structure, how to set up your tech. The orientation leader needed you to understand the information and remember what they said.

Nicole: You know what they didn’t need? They didn’t need you to raise your hand and say, “Umm I think this mission needs a rewrite” or “This org structure isn’t working for me.” THAT would be Discern Listening.

Maegan: Yeah, that would also be very rude to do at your new job. Immerse Listening is the closest to active listening—see, we told you we were fans. There are plenty of times at work where your job is to soak in the details. As long as you actually remember what you’re supposed to remember.

Nicole: But again, Immerse Listening is only one of the ways you need to listen at work. What about those meetings where time is running out, everyone’s still debating, and someone needs to make a decision?

Maegan: That’s when the person or group needs Advance Listening. That’s listening with the goal to move projects, people, and processes forward. So listening for “what’s next” not “what’s working or not working,” like Discern Listening or “what do I need to remember” like Immerse Listening.

Nicole: When you know someone is struggling, and the deadline is fast approaching, you can listen and respond in a way that gets them unstuck. And sometimes—SOMETIMES—that means it’s ok to interrupt them. Are you shocked that we just told you great listeners sometimes interrupt?

Maegan: Nicole and I were in a working session, putting together a recommendation for our executive team, and we were working up until the last minute. Not because we procrastinated but because we wanted to get it right! But something just wasn’t clicking.

Nicole: We were in a virtual meeting, I had my head in my hands and I said “AAHHH This argument just isn’t—”

Maegan: “Flip the order! Flip the order of the main points!” Yep. I interrupted her. And she wasn’t mad at me. She was relieved. Because instead of sitting there, nodding my head, and saying “I know...isn’t this frustrating,” I read the room. I helped her get unstuck. There are plenty of times at work when you’re in high energy, high action meetings where you’re all sprinting to the finish line.

Nicole: But there are also plenty of times at work where people don’t need you to move forward with such urgency, or remember every detail, or call out all the risks. Like when the team is celebrating a big win, or someone just got really bad news. That’s where the last goal comes in, and it comes with a twist.

Maegan: As manager-direct report, Nicole and I have weekly 1:1s. She came to me right right after a client meeting where she had pitched to an executive three creative options for how he could open a big, high stakes presentation. And what feedback did you get from this client in that meeting, Nicole?

Nicole: “It’s not that I don’t like them; it’s that I hate them. They’re all tied for last place.”

Maegan: Now, I’m a department head. I care about making clients happy. But I also care about Nicole. And I know she’s great at her job and has a track record of getting it right. So in a split second I made the decision to say, “Wow, you must have felt so thrown.”

Nicole: And in that split second, Maegan gave me exactly what I needed: Support Listening. She didn’t rush in to fix it. She didn’t scold me. She didn’t probe me with more questions. She validated my emotions. And don’t worry, the client loved my revisions.

Maegan: That’s not the twist. This is: Support Listening is the only type of listening you have to do every time you listen to someone at work. Even when someone needs you to Discern,

Immerse, or Advance—the types of listening that make sense at work because that’s how work gets done—they ALSO need you to Support.

Nicole: A nod of appreciation. A heavy sigh to match theirs. Sometimes that’s all it takes, and sometimes they just need you to sit with them.

Maegan: When you take these four goals and you move them into a different order, they spell the word SAID. Because at work you’re always listening for what’s said—and even what’s not said.

Nicole: Ready for a bonus? You’re already REALLY good at listening for one of these goals. Because just like there are four goals, there are four listening styles. And they have the same names.

Maegan: The goals are what people need from you: Support, Advance, Immerse, Discern. The styles are how you naturally show up as a listener: Support, Advance, Immerse, Discern. And that’s where things get interesting. Because once you know someone’s goal, you get to decide: do I listen the way that’s easiest for me? Or do I adapt to meet their needs?

Nicole: You might have already spotted your SAID Listening Style, but if not, let’s go through each one. You might be a Support Listener if you’re listening in a group and you get frustrated when some people don’t get a chance to contribute. That’s because Support Listeners prioritize other people’s emotions, so they want every voice in the room to be included.

Maegan: You might be an Advance Listener if you get frustrated when you

get to the end of a meeting and no one’s made a decision. Where everyone’s looking around thinking, “Soooo, what’s next?” That’s because Advance Listeners prioritize forward momentum. And for better or worse, that’s me.

Nicole: You might be an Immerse Listener if you get frustrated when people start jumping in and offering options before all the background and context is clear. That’s because Immerse Listeners prioritize the content, and they want the full picture.

Maegan: You might be a Discern Listener if you get frustrated when people jump to solutions too quickly. That’s because Discern Listeners prioritize evaluation, and they want to spot all the pitfalls before giving a “YES.” That’s Nicole.

Nicole: Yes. It’s me. Sometimes I get a reputation for being a naysayer, but I swear, my intentions are noble. I want to make sure we don’t fall face first into a dark hole that nobody saw coming.

Maegan: Sometimes your SAID Listening Style will match up with the goals and listening is very easy. But most of the time you have to learn how to adapt to meet someone’s needs.

Nicole: So the fresh-out-of-college new hire knows when the customer needs small talk to build the relationship AND when it’s time to move the sale forward and make the ask.

Maegan: So people leaders know when everyone is on the same page and ready for action, AND when employees are too angry or upset to be productive anymore—no matter what they tell you.

Nicole: Great listeners, Adaptive Listeners, know how to process and

respond the right way at the right time, for the person speaking to them.

Maegan: Yeah, so the opposite of the way I listened to Nicole on our writing retreat. I was pushing us forward to meet a deadline that didn’t really matter. I needed to be less Advance and more Discern.

Nicole: And I could’ve handled it better, too. I should’ve said, “I know you’re worried about the deadline, and I am too. But this section isn’t right. So, let’s fix it now—or come back to it later.”

Maegan: That would have been much kinder! But, ya know, we hadn’t finished the book yet, so we weren’t wise. Plus, outta snacks. So we’ll give each other a pass.

Nicole: Because being a great listener at work is hard. Work is messy. People are messy. YOU are messy. But now you’ll know why the meeting got heated, why that project got stalled, why that 1:1 felt off.

Maegan: And with just a little bit of practice, you’ll get it right the first time. You’ll listen the way your leaders, your direct reports, your customers—maybe even your partners and parents need—before they even have to say it. All you have to do is ask yourself one question first: “What does this person need from me right now?” That’s it.

Nicole: That’s enough to stop listening the way you want and start listening the way they need. Want more trust and better, faster results at work? Your next opportunity to be a great adaptive listener is just one meeting one presentation, or one writing retreat away.

WINNER: HEALTHCARE

“The Simple Way AI Can Make You Healthier”

By Francisco Mahfuz and Brian Miller for
Elena Ikononovska



Delivered at TEDxKULeuvenBrussels
Brussels, Belgium, March 5, 2025

We all want to be healthy. When we're not, we want to trust our doctors to help us get better.

But what do you do when you can't find the help you need?

This was 2023. After spending a decade as an AI expert working for companies like Google, Reddit and Change.org, I had become a start-up founder and the work had started to take a toll on my health.

I was experiencing strange symptoms.

After some meals, I would get a dry mouth and heart palpitations. I would feel heavy and anxious for hours, unable to focus on work.

I went to a few doctors who all reassured me that nothing was wrong with me. “Your labs look normal, just eat healthy, try to avoid stress and look after yourself.”

“What do you mean ‘look after yourself’? I haven't had sugar in 10 years, I eat a big salad every day, I rarely drink, I go to sleep early and I work out all the time.”

They didn't have much to say after that.

But I went back home and made my diet even stricter, it was all I could do.

A few months later, I got worse, but my lab results were still in the normal ranges. They ran more tests but nothing looked outrageously high.

“What needs to happen so I can finally see a specialist?”—I begged the doctor.

So she finally referred me to a specialist, who refused to help me because she was “too busy dealing with people who have real problems.”

I felt really frustrated, I just couldn't understand, “Why won't they help me? Why can't they just do their jobs right?”

But what if the problem is not that they wouldn't help me—but that they couldn't?

When I talk to people, what most believe is that AI will improve medicine by diagnosing better and faster than human doctors, and by finding new cures.

That's also what most AI experts are confident about.

It's no surprise that AI already can do things like finding cancers in images that the human eye can't.

Most people expect technology to do the same things we can do - only faster or more accurately.

But few people imagine that very soon you might wake up, look into your AI-powered mirror, and it will advise you to take it easy for the day because your cortisol levels are too high.

Or that you will call your doctor to book an appointment, and within only 25 seconds an AI will be able to recognize signs of depression long before severe symptoms become obvious.

Or that when you scan your face to unlock your phone, an AI will be able to read your heart-rate and spot anything out of the ordinary - like the early signs of a heart attack.

It sounds like science fiction, but it's actually happening right now.

You'd think that if we combine the abilities of doctors and AI we would get the best of both worlds—but we won't.

Because perfect diagnosis is not how healthcare will improve.

A growing body of research now suggests that AI is outperforming doctors, even when they use it as a tool.

A recent trial found that for every 10 patients, radiologists got their diagnosis wrong 2 or 3 times. When they used AI, that improved—but only a little.

When AI worked independently, however, it was right 9 out of 10 times.

Another study explains why: the issue was that doctors often undervalued the AI input compared to their own judgment.

They stuck to their initial impressions even when the AI was correct, which led them to make less accurate diagnoses.

That suspicion is understandable: most of us tend to think that if a new technology isn't perfect, then it's not ready for use yet.

For example, we are shocked when driverless vehicles crash, but rarely consider that human drivers cause around 1.3 million fatal car accidents every year.

So having amazing technology helps, but not if the people supposed to use it don't trust it enough yet.

And before we put the blame on doctors, we need to realize what they're dealing with:

What I didn't know back then was that because doctors are trained to work with the risks that affect a majority of patients, it's not standard practice to run extra tests that aren't necessary for most.

For example, why worry about cardiovascular risks in a 40-year old when that's rarely an issue for another 20 years or more?

They also don't have the time to do it.

The average doctor sees so many patients a day that in many cases they only have 15 minutes per session.

In some places, it's even less than that.

They are overworked, stretched thin, and this situation is taking its toll on their health too.

Today, 50% of our doctors are experiencing a burnout that has lasted longer than a year.

Is it that surprising then that they would ignore mild issues, and tell someone like me that everything is normal?

And even if they trusted the new technology, and found the time to use it, who's going to pay for it?

Extra tests have costs which are often not covered by insurance.

Having an AI examine patients before visits would definitely save doctors' time, but unless your doctor's office can charge your insurance plan for those AI services—which they can't right now—the burden will fall on you.

This means most of us will not be able to afford the benefits brought by AI to medicine anytime soon.

Until we figure out how to get the technology trusted and paid for, doctors will remain overburdened with patients who have acute problems and desperately need their help.

Despite the progress of technology, our approach to health will remain more reactive, treating symptoms when they are already becoming serious, instead of proactively spotting things long before they become real issues.

Does that mean it's all doom and gloom then, or is there something we can do about it?

When I wasn't able to get answers from my doctors, I did something quite radical: I decided to find answers on my own.

Getting a medical degree was out of the question so instead I used an AI that could read the vast body of medical research available and answer some of my questions directly.

So the next time a doctor told me that my exams looked fine when I was feeling low in energy, I pushed back and insisted on further testing.

Once the results came back, it was clear to both of us that I had an iron deficiency.

When I thought I was eating healthy but still had blood sugar issues no doctor had answers for, an AI helped me focus on foods that better suited my biology, and the problem improved almost immediately.

When I couldn't get an endocrinologist to look deeper into my hormone imbalances, I turned again to AI, which pointed me to a genetic mutation that might have been causing the problem.

I was able to get that confirmed and finally got the medication I needed.

We're still a long way away from having AI being used widely in doctors' offices everywhere.

But AI will change something fundamental much faster—and that is how WE show up to our doctor's appointments.

New AI tools can give us an unprecedented understanding of what's happening inside of our bodies.

It won't make us doctors, or replace our doctors, but it will help us know the right questions to ask.

This is the future of patient empowered precision medicine and it's coming faster than you think.

These days many of my friends show up to doctor's appointments with tons of research and doctors are glad to run more tests.

But there's something even more transformative about to happen as we take ownership of our health and demand more testing.

Recent research has found that basic tests available right now can already find important genetic indicators that are able to predict problems multiple decades ahead.

In my case, genetic mutations were causing many of the issues I was experiencing.

It turns out I had an unrecognized Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, a genetic disorder associated with insulin

resistance, cardiovascular risks AND breast cancer which is the second leading cause of death for women in the US today.

Doctor after doctor missed it. AI didn't. And that knowledge might have saved my life.

Now I don't expect everyone to take it upon themselves to spend hours speaking to an AI like I did, even some of my friends think that's a little too much!

But here's what you can do:

Go to your doctor and ask them to run more comprehensive bloodwork tests, and do that at least twice a year.

Question them about the results. Try to understand more.

And, just in case, check what an AI has to say about those results.

Even in the cheapest and most frequently used blood exams there are important signals about serious health risks like heart attack or cancer that an AI can find.

But that only works if you are tested regularly.

We think that better diagnosis is what AI will deliver, but in reality we cannot imagine the full extent of discoveries it will make as it becomes more intelligent.

Before this technology changes the health systems we depend on, it will change us.

It will empower us to speak up for ourselves and become our own strongest advocates.

We don't need to wait for doctors to buy into AI, or for insurance providers to pay for it. We can take the first steps now.

Learn more. Ask better questions. Demand more.

That's how this revolution starts. And it has to start.

Because the future of our health—and our lives—depend on it.

WINNER: LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

“Who is my Neighbor? A Call to Serve on the Road Ahead”

By Jackson Wessells for Angela F. Williams,
President and CEO, United Way Worldwide



Delivered at the National League of Cities 2025 City Summit,
Salt Lake City, Nov. 22, 2025

Good afternoon, everyone! Thank you, Clarence, for those kind words, and for continuing to nurture the invaluable partnership between United Way and the National League of Cities.

It’s an honor to be here to help you close out the 2025 City Summit!

I hope this week, you learned something new and made new connections. I hope you reignited hope and energy in your work. And I trust you’ll pack your takeaways from Salt Lake City into your suitcases and bring them back to your communities, putting them into action.

I also imagine that you engaged in some pretty tough conversations this week.

The federal government shutdown is over. But recovering from the strain it put on our communities will take time.

We are all feeling the pressure. Our hands are collectively on the plow as we push forward to keep our communities functioning and thriving.

I know, it’s hard, which is why you need to draw strength from each other as you prepare to go home and reengage your communities.

If you all will join me, let’s create a moment and a memory together that we can reflect upon during those hard days, whenever they may come.

Look around this room.

Look to your neighbors on your left...and on your right...and in front of you...and behind.

Take a picture in your mind.

Remember: you are not alone.

And even though many of you are far from home, we are all neighbors in this room today.

I say neighbors because, in this moment, I am reminded of the parable

of the Good Samaritan. (Some of you may know that I’m not only the CEO of United Way Worldwide, but also an ordained minister.)

So, you may know this parable. But if not, it goes like this:

A man once asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And Jesus said, “Along with loving god with all your heart, you must love your neighbor as yourself.”

In response, the man asked a good question: “But who is my neighbor?”

And Jesus told him a story:

A traveler is walking from Jerusalem to Jericho. Along the way, robbers attack him, steal his possessions, and leave him for dead.

Other travelers see the man lying by the road and pass him by.

But then, a Samaritan—a stranger from another land and a different background—stops.

He bandages the traveler’s wounds. He gives him food and water. And then he lifts him onto his donkey, takes him to the inn down the road, and pays for his care.

And Jesus says, “That is what it means to be a neighbor.”

Not proximity. Not similarity. But compassion. Responsibility. And the ability to honor each other’s humanity and serve as a source of strength for those in need.

At United Way, when we see someone hurting, we don’t ask, “Is this my problem?” We ask, “How can I help?”

In fact, it was a good Samaritan who founded United Way, 138 years ago.

Her name was Francis Wisebart Jacobs, who, on a winter night in frontier Colorado, came across a mother and her newborn. They had nowhere to sleep, no food, no clean clothes, and no one to lean on.

And Francis asked, “How can I help?”

But she didn’t stop there. She knew there were others in her community struggling.

She faced the same question we are all working to answer today: How can we come together to build a community that supports our neighbors in need?

So, she gathered a coalition of local leaders: a Rabbi, a Catholic priest, and two Protestant ministers to work together...in a United Way...to build a system of support for their neighbors.

And 138 years later, United Way’s mission remains the same.

We bring together community partners to meet people where they are when they’re facing eviction, job loss, barriers to education, fallout from disaster, or the impossible choice between paying for medicine or groceries.

Yes, we offer a bandage if you’re bleeding, but we also offer a path forward to healing.

United Way helps you find food when you’re starving, but we also help to prevent hunger by working with local partners to develop sustainable farming programs and mobile food distribution networks.

United Way helps you make ends meet when you lose your job, but we also partner with local businesses to expand employment opportunities and promote reliable local job markets.

United Way helps you find shelter after you’re evicted, but we also create homelessness diversion programs to help keep a roof over your family’s head. And we help you build financial literacy skills so you have an emergency fund for when times get tough.

Yes, we will pick you up on the side of the road if you’re hurting, but we

also pave the road in front of you, so your journey forward has fewer potholes and roadblocks.

And across America's towns and cities, you are stepping up for your neighbors in the same way, especially during a moment when federal systems of support are less reliable than usual.

Because even when Washington shuts down, cities stay open.

Right now, we are all walking that road from Jerusalem to Jericho. And some of our neighbors are lying on the roadside, wounded by broken systems and neglect.

The question is: Will we stop? Will we act? Will we see the humanity in each other?

And I think I know your answer, because during the federal government shutdown, I saw local and city governments join forces with United Way to help our neighbors navigate the chaos.

In Washington DC, in response to the shutdown, United Way of the National Capital Area expanded their free counseling and workforce development services at the five Financial Empowerment Centers they operate in partnership with local governments.

United Way Suncoast in western Florida worked with nonprofit and local government leaders to create a Government Shutdown Resources hub to organize county-by-county services.

United Way estimates that calls to the 211 health and human services hotline related to food needs quadrupled during the shutdown. And it put an unbelievable strain on our communities.

For example, at the Greater Boston Food Bank, the need for food was so great the week after SNAP benefits lapsed, they had to increase their food distribution by more than 500,000 pounds compared to the same time last year.

That is why, earlier this month, when the federal government shutdown threatened to cut off SNAP benefits entirely, United Way and the

211 network launched a food assistance resource finder on the 211 website.

This tool gave people in need an easy-to-use platform to connect them to every food resource in their zip code.

And it was made possible by our partnership with state and local governments who are working with United Way to transform 211 into the go-to nationwide system for community service connections.

The shutdown further illuminates 211's critical value as a lifeline to those in need, and as a source of knowledge for public officials like you.

Last year, 211 received 16.8 million requests. Let me say that again: 16.8 million requests.

Calls from desperate parents who can't feed their children. Requests from military veterans in need of housing. Pleas from senior citizens who can't pay their heating bills.

These are all proof points.

16.8 million proof points that help United Way and government leaders better understand where resources are needed most.

But, 211's role as a "canary in the coal mine"—so to speak—is limited.

Up until this point, 211 programs have remained siloed—each only tracking data in their jurisdiction.

And that is why I am very proud to share that we are transforming 211 into a collaborative, connected, and fully national program capable of sharing data in real-time.

By the end of this year, we will have eight states with their data on a shared National 211 Needs Dashboard. Those states are Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

This is a historic milestone for United Way that will make the nonprofit and government sectors more informed and more responsive to people's needs.

But now is when we need you—ALL of you—to help us realize 211's potential.

Because this data belongs to you and your neighbors. Let us help you use it for good.

Eight states ... that's just the beginning.

Our goal is for every U.S. state and territory to be part of the National 211 Dashboard.

How can you help us accomplish our mission?

Be a champion for 211 in your state.

Be the Good Samaritan not only helping those in need, but galvanizing your neighbors to be part of the future that we hope to build together.

A future built on compassion and dignity.

A future built on trust.

And a future built on the understanding that my neighbor's struggle is my struggle too.

And that even one hungry child, even one person without a bed to sleep in, even one family with nowhere to turn after disaster, even one neighbor without a community to lean on—is not acceptable.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho runs through every city and town in America.

And even though I'm concerned about the potholes and roadblocks in our way, I'm also encouraged, because I know that each of you will be on the roadside, with your toolkits, your bandages, your food, water, and warm clothing at the ready, to guide your fellow travelers down the path to a brighter future.

And I hope you will remember that United Way stands strong beside you, serving as a connector and convener at the heart of every community.

So, as you prepare to return home, let's continue to work together, so every neighbor in their moment of need is met not just by a voice—but a chorus—of community leaders, asking, "How can we help?"

Thank you.

WINNER: PHILOSOPHY AND/OR RELIGION

“Darkness and Light—National Hanukkah Celebration”

By Ferry Piekart for Mariëlle Paul,
Minister of Social Affairs and Employment



Delivered at the National Hanukkah Celebration,
Dam Square, Amsterdam, Dec. 21, 2025

My fellow citizens,
Rabbi Menachem Evers,
It is wonderful to see so many of you
here today.

And it is truly an honor to speak to
you this evening.

Thank you for having me.

Dear friends,

When you look up at the night sky
on a clear, cloudless evening, you see an
endless expanse of black and only tiny
points of white.

Yet no one has eyes for all that black-
ness.

We look at the stars, the planets,
the moon:

at everything that shines in that vast
darkness.

We are doing that today as well.

As we do every year during the eight
days of Hanukkah.

Each day we add another candle,
another small flame, to the hanukkiah
until, on the eighth day, they are all
burning.

It is the Festival of Lights.

Lights that lift our spirits and give us
hope.

But today, it is hard to ignore the
darkness.

We all watched in shock and disbelief
the news of the brutal attack on Jews in
Sydney.

Terrorists opening fire on innocent
people who had gathered on a beach to
mark the beginning of Hanukkah.

And yet, there were lights in Sydney
as well.

Ahmed al Ahmed, the fruit vendor
who at great risk to himself disarmed
one of the attackers.

He was a light.

Boris and Sofia Gurman, an elderly
couple who tried to stop one of the ter-
rorists as he stepped out of his car.

They paid with their lives.

They too were lights.

Anyone who stands up against anti-
semitism is a light.

That includes you, standing here
today.

Simply by being present, you turn
this Festival of Lights into a statement
against hatred.

I know that some of you are cel-
ebrating Hanukkah for the very first
time.

You responded to the invitation
from Chanan Hertzberger to Jewish
and non-Jewish people from Amster-
dam to attend this celebration.

To show that we stand strong together.

There are many more non-Jewish
people, not here tonight, who lit
candles in their homes this week, took
a picture of it, and shared it online.

As a sign of solidarity.

That moves me deeply.

It strengthens my belief that those
of good heart are still in the majority.

I said that last month, at the Na-
tional Kristallnacht Commemoration,
and I say it again today.

When you look at the night sky, you
look at the stars, not at the darkness.

That is where I began.

Today, we are doing the same thing.

In a moment, we will light eight
candles for eight days of Hanukkah.

Together we will look at the light,
not at the dark.

Those candles will burn until they
go out on their own.

Their flames will fade, but I hope
that the light you see tonight will stay
with you.

Because light gives us hope.

It warms us.

It allows us to dream.

It makes us feel safe.

We hold on to the light, because that
is where everything begins.

It was for good reason that God said:
“Let there be light.”

And there was light.

That is how order emerged from
chaos.

I wish you all a joyful Hanukkah.

Chag chanoeka sameach.

WINNER: RHETORIC AND COMMUNICATION

“The Magic of Message: How to Talk Less, Say More, and Magically Connect with Anyone”

Written and delivered by Brian Miller,
Messaging Consultant, Clarity Up Consulting



Las Vegas, July 12, 2025

Full keynote with improv and interactive elements. No word-for-word script, video only.

<https://tinyurl.com/2s4hmykm>

WINNER: SOCIAL JUSTICE

“How to Keep Our Kids Safe From Hidden Dangers”

By Francisco Mahfuz and Brian Miller for
Ashley Hill



Delivered as TEDx Talk,
Mount Rubidoux, California, April 19, 2025

We all want to keep our children safe. But what exactly does that mean?

I thought I knew, until 2015. That’s when I started working as a clinical therapist in a group home for foster kids.

I believed that I would only be dealing with girls not getting along with each other, or not adjusting to their new families, but I soon found out I was wrong.

I was working with a 14-year old who was always running away from the group home, never around long enough to get help.

I thought she was just out partying or hanging out with friends, but I asked one of my colleagues, and what I heard was,

“Oh, I think she’s away with a pimp again.”

If that sounds crazy to you, that was my reaction too.

But I was the only one, because all of my new colleagues suspected that she was being human trafficked, which completely caught me by surprise.

At that point I still had a completely distorted view of what human trafficking was and who was at risk from it.

But as I learned more I started seeing the same signs in many other

kids, and here are the 3 most common: running away, being secretive about partners and having money they can’t explain.

Nothing that sounded out of ordinary for any teenagers who are a little rebellious, or going through a difficult time, but now I found out there could be something much darker behind those behaviors.

And then I heard about one of these girls being raped in a parking lot, not being helped by anyone around her, and I decided we had to better.

Human trafficking affects thousands of children every year in the US alone—but very few parents realize it could happen to their families, because they don’t even know what human trafficking IS.

How can we protect our kids from something we know nothing about?

While we believe our homes are safe havens, thousands of children find themselves in dangerous situations each year.

So, what is the primary risk factor for human trafficking?

The problem here is that most of us think about human trafficking the wrong way—if we think about it at all.

Before I started working with kids, all I knew about human trafficking came from Hollywood.

Back then, I thought a pimp was someone wearing a hat and a fur coat and walking with a cane just to look cool.

I thought human trafficking was like in the movie Taken, where American girls are kidnapped by a gang of Eastern European criminals and auctioned off to the highest bidder.

And that’s not even the craziest stuff you see out there. There are lots of rumors that human traffickers use zip ties to mark the cars of the people they want to kidnap.

They give people roses injected with drugs.

They drive around neighborhoods in unmarked white vans.

I’ve even heard that they were putting trackers on Victoria Secret’s bras and following women home!

I know it sounds ridiculous but it’s nothing to laugh about: It is estimated that every 2 minutes a child is trafficked for sexual exploitation in the US.

It’s hard to find reliable numbers because much of this goes unreported, but there are studies that suggest that number could be substantially higher than that.

But what I can tell you is that in my work with kids in the foster care system,

at one point I suspected as many as half the children I worked with were being trafficked - and I say “suspected” because I saw the signs but the kids wouldn’t admit they were in contact with pimps, or even that a grown-up was giving them money.

I also learned that a pimp is anyone who’s exploiting people sexually, and they can be found in all areas of society.

Not long ago, for example, a very famous R&B singer was convicted for human trafficking. And this is a guy who’s won Grammys and sold millions of albums!

The issue is real, it’s widespread, and it’s not restricted to any one community:

The average victim is 15 years old and they come from every socio-economic group, race, gender and religion across the US.

This is everyone’s problem.

When I talk to people about this, something I often hear is,

“Well, that sounds like a real danger for foster kids, but kids growing up in a nice stable home, they don’t have to worry about that.”

And I used to think that too, until I met Anna.

Anna was a middle-child, who got little attention growing up and most of that attention was because she’d gotten herself in trouble or she was doing something wrong.

She always felt like a black sheep, like she never fit in.

One night she was woken up by her father in the middle of the night and he said,

“I told you to wash the dishes and you didn’t.”

“What are you talking about?? When I went to bed the kitchen was clean!”

“Don’t you lie to me, you...”

And he called her a word that no father should ever call a daughter.

In the morning, when her dad was off to work and her mom was out with one of her brothers, she ran away.

She didn’t have money for food or a place to stay. She took a ride, accepted some help and before she knew it she

had gotten herself into a situation she couldn’t get out of.

Anna was 17 when she was trafficked, and it took her years to escape.

This can happen to anyone.

Is human trafficking more common with foster kids and those who didn’t come from a stable home? Sure.

But it does take more than a roof over their head, food at the table or even two parents living together to make our families immune from this issue.

Sometimes, the only opportunity human traffickers need is an unhappy kid having a difficult relationship with their parents - and which family doesn’t have that at some point?

So while we think about all these Hollywood scenarios that would never happen to our children, we miss the most common way in which it happens.

I know this because of what happened to me when I was 12.

Back then, I spent a lot of time chatting with friends on AOL Instant Messenger—for all of you young folks, this was the way we messaged people around the world during my time.

I developed a crush on a boy I met online, a boy that I never met in person.

We talked about our day-to-day, like how even though I loved being a cheerleader and wearing that black and yellow uniform, I was also a bit nerdy and introverted. My mom would say, “ain’t nothing wrong with you girl. You’re fine just the way you are”—but I never felt like I fit in.

I told him everything I was up to and he was such a great listener.

Over time, we chatted more and more, and eventually, he started asking me to meet him in person. He’d say things like, “I’m coming down to California with my family soon. Do you want to hang out?”

I’d respond, “I’ll ask my mom!” and she’d tell me, “Sure, as long as I can meet him and his family.” And I’d think, “Great, now all I need is for her to get ‘positive vibes’ and we’ll be good.”

But each time I did, something strange would happen—he’d disappear. For months, I wouldn’t hear from him. Then, suddenly, he’d show up

online again, and the same pattern would repeat. This happened over the course of many years.

Only after I started working with kids being trafficked it dawned on me that’s what he was trying to do.

I believe I was speaking to a trafficker, someone grooming me without my knowledge—which happens to thousands of kids everyday.

People worry about kidnapping, but most of the danger is online, on dating sites or social media like Facebook and Instagram.

Nearly half of all kids online have been approached by someone they thought was trying to manipulate them, or had someone they didn’t know ask them for nude pictures.

That is already happening to 9-year olds.

We need to realize human trafficking is not a dramatic movie plot but a risk to everyday families.

It can affect every community; it can reach into stable homes; it does not matter how much money you have, where you come from or the color of your skin.

The main risk factor these kids have in common is this: They are alone - or feel alone.

They don’t see their parents as people they can trust, people they can share their life with. They are looking for a connection they don’t have at home.

So here’s how to make sure YOUR kids don’t become victims of it either.

In this digital world, anyone in the world can have access to your child, so we need to take steps to protect them from online grooming.

There are many ways you can do that:

You can “Friend” your kids on social media

Install parental control apps or software on their devices

Tell them you forbid certain websites or chats

Create rules about their internet usage

Have direct access to their accounts

All of these approaches CAN work, but you might not want to play Big

Brother in your kids' online life and, let's be honest, if they really want to do something you don't want them to, they'll find a way.

So whatever you decide to do, I suggest you START by asking them these questions:

What would you do if you met someone online and they asked you to go somewhere and hang out with them?

What if they asked you for pictures?

What if they offer you money?

What if they ask where you live and how you live with?

Their answers will tell you how aware they are of these dangers, and what their instincts for dealing with them are like.

There's a good chance some of what they'll say will be far from ideal, but you need to resist the temptation to give them a hard time about it.

Instead of judging them, taking control or telling them what to do, focus on making them feel they can talk to you about anything.

If they think they'll get in trouble, they won't trust you with things like this anymore.

If they believe you're there for them, there's a much better chance they'll come to you if something happens—just like I did with my mom.

But I was lucky.

Without that relationship, I wouldn't be fighting human trafficking now—I'd have been a victim of it.

Because human trafficking is not like what we see in Hollywood.

The way we fight it is not with fists or guns.

We do it by loving our kids.

By talking to them.

By letting them know we've got their back, no matter what.

And, if we do that, we're not only protecting our children from human trafficking.

We're also building much closer and stronger relationships with the people we care about most in the world.

Isn't that what we all want anyway?

WINNER: TECHNOLOGY

"The Ability Hand: The Future of Prosthetics"

Written and delivered by JoAnna Noon



Delivered at Modesto Junior College,
Modesto, California, Nov. 17, 2025

On a cloudy afternoon in May, you jump on your motorcycle, headed to a friend's house, then a distracted teen hits you head on—severing your left hand and shattering more than 20 bones. Coast Guard veteran Shaun Melendy had to live this nightmare on May 5th, 2022. In *The Enterprise 2023*, Dr. Matthew Carty of MIT's Center for Extreme Bionics explained that miraculously Melendy's muscle fibers and nerves remained intact at the site of amputation. This made him a prime candidate for an experimental procedure. You see, Dr. Carty and his team were able to connect Melendy's surviving nerves to an innovative prosthetic called the Ability Hand. Now, Melendy can use his new hand simply by thinking.

I get it, it sounds straight from *Star Wars*—but as *Avalere Health* reported in 2024, more than 5.6 million Americans live with limb difference. For them, the promise of this technology is very real.

In a Galaxy not so far, far away, we'll get a grasp on what the Ability hand is; then, get a handle on how it works, before finally reaching for its broader implications.

How did Melendy's story of tragedy turn to one of possibility? The answer begins with PSYONIC's Ability Hand's innovative design. Dr. Aadeel Akhtar founded the PSYONIC company and developed the Ability Hand, which *Popular Mechanics* has deemed the most "badass" prosthetic in 2022. *Form Labs* detailed its construction in another 2022 article, explaining that the main body is 3D printed from skin-safe 1500 resin, making it tough, impact-resistant, and thermal resistant. With 32 grip patterns, users can complete tasks like gently gripping an egg to hoisting 79 pounds of weight. Furthermore, it is jam-packed with high-tech features—and already compatible with most prosthetic devices of today. Plus, it has a high-capacity lithium polymer battery that can hold

a 6-8 hour charge. Even cooler, this prosthetic can actually charge your phone! Youtube tech reviewer Marques Brownlee stated earlier this year that it has the fastest Bluetooth pairing he's ever used.

Additionally, the hand offers touch-screen compatible silicone fingertips. Jackson Chung of *Techeblog* in 2025 says that it's the very first prosthetic of its kind to offer multi-sensory feedback. How? Well, think of your residual limb as a PS5 controller with haptic touch feedback vibrations. Or the vibration you feel when you get a text on your phone. The Ability Hand uses similar vibrations to mimic sensation against your residual limb. For example, Iraq war veteran Garret Anderson lost his forearm because of a roadside bomb. But with the Ability Hand, he can deadlift, cook, tie shoes and, most importantly, hold hands with his daughter. In a 2024 interview with ABC7, Anderson said "It's given me things that other prosthetics haven't been able

to—being able to feel my daughter’s hand...or touch their face.”

That kind of ability is not accidental—it’s engineered. So now that we know what the Ability Hand is, let’s get a handle on how it works, attaches, and customizations.

First, let’s examine how the hand functions. PSYONIC’s Ability hand is myoelectric. Sensors called EMG electrodes stick to users’ skin and act as translators between your brain and the Ability Hand. The sensors stand guard for any tiny electrical impulses that come from flexing your residual muscles and tell the hand, “Hey, catch that water bottle!” And thanks to the built-in sensors, the hand can even gauge grip pressure so you don’t crush it.

Another crucial feature is how it’s attached. Typically the hand is attached to a “socket” that fits over a person’s residual limb. However, this means that it can shift and slide during the day. But, as explained in a 2023 Builder Nation interview, Dr. Akhtar is working on a version that attaches directly to someone’s bone with titanium implants. This new procedure is happening right now in San Diego, and restores a full range of motion.

Beyond the hardware, the hand is customizable through the use of the PSYONIC app. The app allows users and clinicians to modify EMG responsiveness, Touch Sensor responsiveness, and Grip Sets. The app offers intuitive control, versatile functionality, and sensory feedback. This allows users to cook, drive, and change a tire again. And wield a robotic hand just like Luke Skywalker. Pure science fiction. Right?

Beyond the individual benefits, this technology points us toward something

larger: let’s look at what this prosthetic technology can mean for society as a whole. The Ability Hand stands out due to its accessibility; future directions; and applications for safety.

When I began researching this, I thought: this is all well and good, but what’s the price tag? And for once, I was pleasantly surprised. Similar prosthetics without haptic touch can cost over \$100,000. But Fox News reported in 2025 that the Ability Hand is closer to \$15-20,000. Not only that, but Medicare insurance covers the Ability Hand. For those who can’t afford it, there is even the Ability Fund—a program that helps individuals access the prosthetic at no personal cost. During the previously cited ABC7 interview, Dr. Akhtar explained that in the past, only 10% of people could afford this technology—but now that number is closer to 75%. This puts renewed ability and touch literally within reach.

The Ability Hand isn’t just accessible. It’s also taking us in exciting new directions. In 2023, 60 minutes showed The Ability Hand can be connected directly to the brain, letting the user not only control the prosthetic but actually feel real sensations through it! No vibrations required! This is possible thanks to a \$100 million Department of Defense Pentagon project. Electrodes are implanted in the brain, which receives touch signals. Neuroscientist Sliman Bensmaïa’s team at University of Chicago made this happen for Brandon Prestwood, a former maintenance crew worker. He can identify finger stimulations blindfolded, describing it as a “pleasant tingling,” like when your hand falls asleep. A 2022 Na-

tional Geographic mini-doc, *Overheard*, says the feeling is outside of the human experience; like “describing a color no one else can see.”

Finally, the Ability Hand has some surprising applications including in manufacturing and even space. Mercedes-Benz told Tech Crunch in 2024 that their new Aptronik humanoid, “Apollo,” uses the hand to tackle repetitive and grueling tasks in the production line. This amps up accuracy, efficiency, and reduces product waste while keeping workers safe. Next stop? the moon! NASA’s robot, and Apollo’s cooler sister, “Valkyrie,” is also armed with the Ability Hand and is set for space! Tech Think Tank Lukas Ziegler says this allows astronauts and workers alike to supervise remotely without risking life—or limb—in hazardous environments, including those in space.

Today, we saw how the Ability Hand is revolutionizing prosthetics for millions of people living with limb differences. We examined the revolutionary technology behind The Ability Hand, how it works, and its broader implications. While Luke Skywalker’s cyber-bionic glow up was pure fantasy, we are not living in a galaxy far-far-away—and Psyonic’s Ability Hand is very real. Disturbed father not included. The Ability Hand bridges human and machine, restoring touch, independence, and human connection. CBS Boston reports that today, Shaun Melendy is still an active outdoorsman—chopping wood and even racing kayaks! The Ability Hand proves that the future of prosthetics isn’t science fiction—it’s here, and it’s profoundly human.

WINNER: AWARD ACCEPTANCE

“2025 RMS Evening of Excellence Awards Remarks”

By Marie Lewis for Stephanie C. Hill,
President, Lockheed Martin Rotary & Mission Systems

Delivered at Lockheed Martin Rotary and Mission Systems
Evening of Excellence, Orlando, Florida, June 7, 2025

[Introductory Remarks]

Good evening, and welcome to a night built for star performers! We’ve set the stage with energy and excitement, but tonight the spotlight belongs to you—our honorees whose achievements are nothing short of spectacular.

Under this grand big top, I’m thrilled to welcome you to our Lockheed Martin Rotary and Mission Systems Evening of Excellence!

Our theme tonight is Rise to the Top!—because that’s exactly what you have done.

I’m Stephanie, and it is my extraordinary privilege to lead the RMS team, together with my tremendously talented Senior Leadership Team, who you all saw tonight.

In our business area of 35-thousand people, tonight we honor our top performers.

Like tightrope walkers without a net, you’ve shown balance in chaos, courage in risk, and grace under pressure.

You didn’t stumble into the spotlight. You climbed, practiced, delivered—again and again—until the curtain rose and the crowd took notice.

Tonight, you aren’t just part of the act. You are the headliners.

Before we continue, I want to welcome a special guest who is very dear to me and to many of you: Dale Bennett.

Dale was the first leader of the Rotary and Mission Systems business, and it’s an honor to have him here. I know so many people are delighted to see you, and I really appreciate you coming.

Will you please stand and be recognized? Let’s welcome him with a round of applause.

[Hold for applause]

[Glass brought out]

Now I’d like to ask the Senior Leadership Team to stand with Dale.

I invite you all to join me in a toast, to the most daring, the most relentless, and the most spectacular among us.

[Raise your glass to the audience]

Let’s raise our glasses to those who dared to rise to the top.

Congratulations on your momentous award in recognition of how you turned effort into excellence, and how you turned performance into a show-stealing legacy.

Thank you for your unwavering commitment to supporting our customers’ critical missions.

To our honorees’ special guests, we are grateful to you for supporting your loved ones and enabling them to do their greatest work to overcome our greatest challenges.

And finally, to the future of our business. With this team, I believe we will continue to turn challenges into trapeze moments, grabbing opportunity midair.

Because we have the greatest performers anywhere.

To the stars of the show. The best of the best. You are, truly, the greatest.

Cheers!

[Drink from glass]

I’ll be back after dinner. In the meantime...please be our guest.

[Please take your glass to your seat with you.]

[Formal Remarks]

Hello again!

I hope everyone enjoyed your dinner—I know I did!

The Disney team always does a wonderful job making everyone feel like a star.

Please give the chefs, the servers, and the entire staff a hand to show our appreciation.

[Lead a round of applause]

I also want to acknowledge our Evening of Excellence planning team, who pulled out all the stops to make this weekend so special for all of us.

An event of this magnitude doesn’t just happen. It takes many dedicated people, working for months to make sure everyone has an unforgettable experience.

Please join me in giving the Evening of Excellence team a much-deserved round of applause.

[Lead another round of applause]

Now, I’m excited to turn the spotlight to the headliners of this event. As the video just highlighted, the greatness of RMS is its people.

It’s in the bold ideas you share. It’s in the calculated risks you take. It’s in the way you show up for each other to serve our customers’ missions.

Our stellar reputation for innovating in the land, sea, air, space and cyber domains took decades to build. It’s your heart, your grit, and your consistency that keep us on top.

It reminds me of a man you may have heard of—Harry Houdini, the sensational escape artist known for his heart stopping performances.

Now, before you say, “Stephanie, what we do is not a bunch of magic tricks!”, hear me out.

Houdini started out as a trapeze performer in the circus. And at first, he wasn’t very successful.

But by the early 1900s, the world watched in awe as Houdini performed what looked like the impossible—escaping from locked tanks, straitjackets, handcuffs, even while being held upside down underwater.

To the audience, it looked like magic.

But what they didn’t see was what made it real: hours of brutal training,

breath-holding drills, lock-picking practice until his fingers bled.

There was no smoke. No mirrors. Just mastery.

You see, while he was known for his daring escapes, what truly defined Houdini was not the danger. It was the discipline.

Every performance that stunned a crowd was backed by hours of unseen preparation. Because Houdini knew there was no room for error. The stakes were simply too high.

You understand the stakes for our customers. For those we serve, the stakes do not get any higher.

And the challenges of those we serve go far, far deeper than a water tank.

They are counting on our performance to deter any threat, and if they need to fight, to resoundingly defeat any adversary.

That is why our performance is our greatest lever.

Your relentless preparation, unseen by most, is vital to those we serve.

Your precision, your planning, your expertise ensures that those on the front lines have the best capabilities possible, when it matters most.

Like Houdini, you operate with the mindset that there is no room for complacency, and that delivering on the mission is non-negotiable.

But unlike Houdini, your work isn't about illusion—it's about readiness, and making sure our customers stay Ahead of Ready.

So tonight, we honor not only your performance, but your preparation. Not only your results, but how you deliver them.

Tonight, we honor 227 exceptional members of our team for their achievements.

That may sound like a lot, but it's actually less than one percent of our total RMS team!

Just to be nominated for an Evening of Excellence Award is a significant accomplishment.

Only peers and leaders—the people you work with every day—can nominate you.

So to all of you who rose to the top—not with tricks, but with talent, not with flash, but with focus—we see you.

And I would be remiss if I did not also acknowledge the most vital element of your success—your loved ones.

You know, Houdini never performed alone. Behind the curtain stood his trusted assistants, often invisible to the audience, but absolutely essential to every jaw dropping moment.

His brother, and later his wife, were his partners and collaborators—and some stunts would have been impossible to pull off without them. And off stage, they were his emotional support when things got tough.

Like Houdini's family, your presence may not always take center stage, but your impact is undeniable.

I know, because I know my support team—my family—has done that for me.

And I marvel at how much faster we are able to rise, when we feel the support of our loved ones.

Your patience, encouragement and sacrifices are the lifeblood of our greatest achievements.

So please, I would like to ask you, the guests of our honorees, to stand, if you are able, for just a moment.

[Family members and guests stand up]

Tonight, I want to spotlight the support team of our awardees, our quiet heroes. You've steadied the ladder when the climb got steep, held the light when the tent grew dark, and showed up precisely when your loved one needed you.

And I will ask now for a round of applause for you, for all the magic you've done behind the scenes.

[Lead a round of applause]

To all of you here tonight, on behalf of our entire business, I want to express my sincere thanks for being here.

I am so exhilarated to celebrate you!

To our honorees, you showed our customers that they can depend on RMS to deliver for them when everything is on the line. When there is no trap door, no highwire safety net.

I am dazzled by your excellence—and that's the greatest show of all.

So, let's begin our Evening of Excellence Awards ceremony and recognize the spellbinding magic that our team members have made real!

###

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WINNER: CAMPAIGN SPEECH

“A Commonwealth United”

By Beau Cribbs for Abigail Spanberger,
Governor-Elect of Virginia



Delivered as election victory speech,
Greater Richmond, Virginia., Nov. 4, 2025

My fellow Virginians: Tonight, we sent a message—we sent a message to every corner of the Commonwealth; a message to our neighbors and our fellow Americans across the country; we sent a message to the whole world—that in 2025, Virginia chose pragmatism over partisanship. We chose our Commonwealth over chaos.

You all chose leadership that will focus relentlessly on what matters most: lowering costs, keeping our communities safe, and strengthening our economy for every Virginian—leadership that will focus on problem solving, not stoking division.

You chose leadership that will always put Virginia first. And Virginia, I cannot wait to get to work for you.

Tonight, we turned a page. We turned that page by listening to our neighbors, focusing on practical results, laying out a clear agenda, and leading with decency and determination.

To everyone who helped us achieve this win—from the bottom of my heart—I thank you for the trust you have placed in me and it is the honor of my lifetime to be elected the 75th Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia!

I would like to thank my opponent for a hard fought race.

The Lieutenant Governor’s story, her military service, and her years of service to Virginia—deserve our respect. I ask you join me in wishing her and her family well.

I also know that her supporters are disappointed today—and to those Virginians who did not vote for me—I want you to know that my goal and intent is to serve all Virginians and that means I will listen to you. I will work for and with you. That is the approach I’ve taken throughout my

whole career. I have worked with anyone and everyone—regardless of political party—to deliver results for the people that I serve.

That’s because I believe in this idea: that there is so much more that unites us as Virginians and as Americans than divides us. I know in my heart that we can unite for Virginia’s future and we can set an example for the rest of the nation.

Our founders understood this from the very beginning. They didn’t choose to call Virginia a “Commonwealth” by accident. They chose it to signify that our government would be based on the power of the people united for a common good. Not for a political party. Not for a President. Not for a monarch. But for a common good. Together.

And tonight, Virginia proved that tradition is alive and well. We are still a Commonwealth in every sense of the word. We are built on the things we share, not the things that pull us apart, and I’m proud that our campaign earned votes from Democrats, Republicans, Independents, and everyone in-between.

That’s the Virginia I know. That’s the Virginia I love. And that’s the Virginia I will have the honor of serving as your next Governor.

I want to thank so many people for the support they’ve given to our campaign. Thank you for your work.

Thank you to our tireless volunteers—to those who have believed in me—thank you for devoting your time your energy, your conviction to this campaign. Thank you for braving the heat, then the cold, then the rain, then the sun. Thank you.

Thank you for talking to your neighbors about the importance of this race. Thank you for recognizing that when

we went person to person engaging, we could bring people not just into supporting our campaign, but engaging in our democracy.

We won this race because of you.

To our campaign team—you are the best team in the country. Every single one of you worked tirelessly for the change, the progress, the policies, the connection, and the respect that you want to see in our communities.

Thank you for working so hard. Thank you for giving people hope. Thank you for knocking doors in the sweltering heat. Thank you for showing kindness. Thank you for showing up in every corner of Virginia. Thank you for diving deep on policy. Thank you for capturing moments and the essence of our campaign. Thank you for reaching voters everywhere, and thank you for believing that Virginia could and would send a hopeful and joyful message.

Thank you for giving everything, everything to this campaign—and then some.

And thank you to my family. To my husband Adam—my partner in everything. I love you with my whole heart, and I am grateful for you and it is very strange to declare my love for you in front of millions of people. But every adventure we have ever been on as been with you by my side. I love you. I’m grateful for you. And I cannot wait to see what the next couple of years bring.

To my daughters—Claire, Charlotte, and Catherine—you inspire and motivate me every single day. Everything I do, I do to build a better Virginia for you and for all of Virginia’s children. I’m so proud of you three every day, and I am lucky to be your mother—and Catherine, you

did not clean your room today as you promised too.

To my sisters—my dearest and earliest friends—I love you. I love you. I love you.

To my friends who have traveled from around the world to be with me here today—thank you for making me who I am and thank you for always believing in me.

And to my parents—I love you. Thank you for leading by example every day. I know that today is a day you all could have never imagined, but you taught me the importance of service to others and relentless hard work.

Mom—when I think about your life—from the time spent in foster care to putting yourself through nursing school and the challenges along the way, you made clear that to whom much is given, much is expected. You have given me so much—born of your own struggles and your own challenges—and I know much is expected.

Dad—thank you for your example of service and tireless devotion to family and country. Nothing has made me prouder than to follow in your footsteps so many steps along the way.

I've talked a lot throughout this campaign about the importance of service and how it's shaped my life and my approach to public office. That all came from my parents.

But this commitment to service isn't unique to my family—it's engrained in so many Virginia families. It's part of Virginia's story.

Here, in Virginia, this is where American democracy was born, and where we're still working to perfect it today.

Where James Madison built the framework for our Constitution to protect us from tyranny.

Where Washington and Jefferson fought to establish a government of, by, and for the people.

It's also where Barbara Johns—a 16-year-old student from Farmville—led a walkout of students that would be part of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case to integrate public schools.

Barbara Johns never gave up and she showed us that no matter your age

you can be part of the change and progress that you want to see here in Virginia and across the nation.

We were a nation founded on ideas—but we are a country where it is up to us—the citizens—who must put those ideas into action. It is us—the citizens who work to make change and progress—and built upon the foundation laid out over so many years. Now, Virginia, it is our time to lead.

Tonight, it's hard not to reflect on this nearly two-year journey we've taken together. And just a few minutes ago, Adam said to our daughters and said: "Your mom is going to be the Governor of Virginia."

I can guarantee those words have never been spoken in Virginia before.

It is a big deal that the girls and young women I have met along the campaign trail now know with certainty that they can achieve anything. It is a big deal to the woman older than I am—who forged the path in dreams, hard work, and belief that change and progress would be possible so many of us could follow in your footsteps—in any career, any role, any challenge.

The history Virginia is making tonight is yours—and I thank those who have come before me—and Mary Sue Terry in particular. She was the first woman elected statewide in Virginia, and because of her and the continued work of so many, there will be many more women to come for generations to come.

So, now that the campaign is over—the real work begins.

Because this was never just about winning an election. It was about what comes next. It is about the governing.

Virginia voters made their choice tonight. And that choice was loud and clear:

We're going to lower the cost of renting, buying, or staying in your home. We are going to cut red tape and build homes families can actually afford.

We're going to lower healthcare costs. We are going to crack down on predatory pharmaceutical practices and surprise billing.

We're going to produce more energy and we're going to lower energy costs. We are going to produce more energy here in Virginia and make sure that data centers pay their fair share.

We're going to grow Virginia's economy by investing in the apprenticeships and job training of the future. We are going to leverage AI and cutting-edge manufacturing to bring more capital investment into our Commonwealth.

We're going to take politics out of our schools. We are going to make sure that teachers are well paid and well respected, so that our students can focus on actually learning and so parents know that their child will succeed.

And we're going to make our communities safer, by providing the training, pay, and support that our law enforcement community needs and deserves.

These aren't slogans on a bumper sticker. They are actionable policies I'm ready to implement on day one. And starting now, that work begins.

So as we begin this transition to a new administration, I want to be absolutely clear about a couple of things:

First: Virginia is the only state in the South that hasn't restricted women's reproductive rights since the *Dobbs* decision. And under my watch, it will stay that way.

In Virginia, healthcare decisions about contraception, fertility treatments, and reproductive care will continue to be made between women and their doctors—not by politicians. That's a promise I've made, and it's a promise I intend to keep.

Second: I will always stand up for Virginia workers. Always.

Right now, our federal workforce is under attack. And the chaos coming out of Washington is killing Virginia jobs and creating economic uncertainty for tens of thousands of families, government employees, government contractors, small business owners who are impacted by the chaos coming out of Washington.

Virginia's economy doesn't work when Washington treats our workers, Virginia workers as expendable.

To those who have been impacted by the mass layoffs, please know that I will direct the full power of the Governor's Office to support you.

And to those across the Potomac who are attacking our jobs and our economy: I will not stand by silently while you attack Virginia workers. I will fight every single day for every single Virginia job. The ones we have now and the ones we will have in the future. I will stand up to you—and to anyone who tries to harm our economy and the livelihoods of our Virginians.

As Governor, my job is to put Virginia first. Full stop.

And tonight, as the Governor-elect, I call on Congress—Republicans and Democrats—and our President to make real progress on bringing this shutdown to an end. The Virginians, the Americans who work tirelessly for their fellow citizens deserve nothing less.

I know we're living in a time filled with chaos. We live in a time marked by uncertainty. And along the way, we do our best to try to explain it to our kids.

I know that the list of challenges we are facing is long. But I also know that the only way we're going to solve these problems is by tackling them together.

Democrats, Republicans, Independents—all of us.

Because that embodies the message we sent tonight. That is what being a Commonwealth is all about: standing united for our future.

That is what Virginia is about!

Let's show the world what we're made of. Let's get to work!

WINNER: COMMEMORATIVE SPEECH

"Making Your Choice"

Written and delivered by Charles Crawford,
Father

//

Delivered in Silchester, England, June 15, 2025

Upon the very Eve of Midsummer
When the sky was blue as sapphire
and the air was cool and fragrant
The riders came to the gates of
Minas Tirith

Last came Master Elrond
Beside him rode Arwen his daughter,
Evenstar of her people
Frodo saw her glimmering in the
evening, sweet fragrance about her
Moved with wonder, he said to
Gandalf:

At last I understand why we've
waited! This is the ending.
Now, not day only shall be beloved
Night too, shall be beautiful and
blessed

And all its fear pass away
Elrond laid the hand of his daughter
in the hand of the King
Together they went up into the City,
as stars flowered in the sky

And Aragorn the King wedded
Arwen Undomiel upon the day of
Midsummer

The tale of their long waiting and
labours
Was come to fulfilment

One of my best friends was a diplomat
like me

We met in 1982, in Belgrade
Some five years older than me.
Married—two young children

I wasn't married. Getting married
was too grown-up!

I asked him: "How do you stay
married? What if you meet someone
else?"

He said something I'm sharing here
today, 42 years later

It's simple. You wake up every
morning; you say to yourself
"This is my choice. This is what I've
chosen"

Think about that!

It's not a choice between jam or
marmalade

Go to the office, or work from home
It's not even like choosing your
favourite football club

However appalling the following
decades of disappointment
When it's Tottenham

No. It's about being free. Free to
make a choice

And free to take responsibility for
your freedom, your choice

Your choice is a fact about you, and
your life

Tolkien put the full story of Arwen
Aragorn in a Lord of The Rings
Appendix

He said it was the real theme of the
whole book

The mystery of the love of the
world in the hearts of Men, who are
doomed to leave it

The anguish in the hearts of Elves,
who are doomed NOT to leave it—
until its story is complete

Arwen chooses: she chooses to give
up her own immortality

To marry Aragorn

And Aragorn chooses

He chooses to accept the responsibility
that her free choice offers
him

But when he nears his end, he asks
her:

“Think again!
The uttermost choice is before you
To repent. Go to the Havens.

Bear away the memory of our days
together.
Or else, to stay

And abide the doom of men”
“Nay, dear Lord” she says
“That choice is long over”

WINNER: COMMENCEMENT/CONVOCATION ADDRESS

“Ikigai: Find Your Reason for Being”

By Kaine Korzekwa for Nita Ahuja,
Dean, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health // Delivered at University of Wisconsin School of Medicine
and Public Health, Madison, Wisconsin, Aug. 22, 2025

Thank you, Dr. Seibert [Sigh-ber],
for that kind introduction.

Congratulations and welcome new
medical students. You have worked
hard to get to this day, to prepare to
don your first white coat. Today reflects
many years of intentional dedication
and tenacious commitment...so take a
pause to acknowledge all you have ac-
complished and enjoy this moment.

Welcome also to the many parents,
family members, and friends joining
us today. Thank you for being here
and thank you for all you have done
to get our students started on their
journey. Congratulations on this in-
credible achievement.

New students, I am thrilled to
witness the start of your journey into
medicine, which will last a lifetime
and be incredibly rewarding. As you
embark on this journey, you will begin
finding what is called your “ikigai”
[ee-kee-guy]—a Japanese concept that
translates into “a reason for being.”
Ikigai is practiced in daily moments,
big decisions, and by those of us who
choose medicine in our careers...
it’s the “why” behind what you do.
It’s about discovering what you love,
committing to excellence, and doing
something the world truly needs.

You will define and refine your ikigai
[ee-kee-guy] throughout your journey
in medicine and the many crossroads
you will encounter—from classes and
clinical rotations, specialty selection
and residency, and where you take
your practice. Ultimately to become
the physician you are called to be—a
person who commits to serving their

patients, a person who heals and brings
compassion to those who are suffering,
a person who understands that medi-
cine today doesn’t have all the answers.
But we also commit to learning so that
the tomorrow is better than today...
meaning you all commit to becoming a
healer and a leader!

There are many reasons I was at-
tracted to UW and am excited to call
Madison home. I am greatly inspired by
how our incredible trajectory of discov-
ery and amazing community intertwine
in support of the Wisconsin Idea. In
case you have not heard of the Wiscon-
sin Idea, it is the profound principle that
our university should serve and elevate
the needs of our communities across
the state of Wisconsin and beyond. As
the nation’s first school of medicine and
public health, we are a shining example
of the Wisconsin Idea. This is mani-
fested in our school’s vision of “healthy
people, healthy communities.”

NOW, you are a very special class
to me—the first MD matriculants in
my role as Dean. Like you, I am new.
While not my very first white coat, I re-
cently received my first crisp white coat
with the UW crest and school logo. I
lined up to get my picture taken for my
WisCard at Union south and had my
first taste of Babcock ice cream from
our local creamery.

In these first few weeks, I also revis-
ited my own ikigai, and have thought
about yours as budding physicians.
I wanted to become dean at a place
like ours because I truly believe in the
transformational role of academic
medicine to change lives—to improve

the quality of life for people of all ages
and backgrounds. We do this by stay-
ing curious and committed...specifi-
cally staying curious about how we can
change the world through our commit-
ment to the Wisconsin Idea.

It is my very personal goal that each
of you leave our school grounded in
the foundations of medicine, with a
commitment to healing AND a lifelong
commitment to learning how to make
the tomorrow you practice better than
the TODAY. As you begin your jour-
ney here, you will see and hear many
examples of lifelong discovery and cu-
riosity from the professors around you.

I want to share a few examples from
our past. For example, Dr. Frederic
Mohs developed Mohs Micrographic
Surgery, which is practiced worldwide
to treat skin cancers. Dr. Mohs was born
in Wisconsin and grew up near campus,
starting on his path to lifelong curiosity
and learning. Dr. Mohs conducted can-
cer research as a medical student here
at UW in the 1930s...research that laid
the foundation for his technique.

Curiosity is powerful, capable of
helping you overcome adversity and a
chorus of doubt. Dr. Mohs challenged
the dogma of his time. As he worked
to gain support for his technique, some
say even his Dean had reservations. But
Dr. Mohs persevered, and eventually
physicians worldwide lined up to learn
from him!

Curiosity was also a powerful force
for a woman named Marguerite Davis,
who was born in 1887 in Racine, Wis-
consin, and loved science. After earning
a bachelor’s degree from the University

of California Berkeley, Marguerite began keeping house for her father in Madison. But this did little to satisfy her curiosity, which drew her to the laboratory of a UW biochemist, where she worked as a research assistant, without pay, for more than five years.

The lab was studying what made a healthy diet. Marguerite helped develop innovative experiments, and in 1913 an article documented how rats on a specific diet thrived when fed an extract from butter or egg yolk, but had poor health if fed a different fat like lard or olive oil. The lab's publication was key to the discovery of vitamin A, solving this mystery. And "Marguerite Davis" was listed as co-author, a rare feat in that era!

And finally, we know that curiosity and collaboration CAN be a magic combination. In 1976, Surgery department chair Dr. Folkert Belzer hired scientist Dr. Jim Southard to direct his research on organ preservation. Their complementary curiosities and expertise supercharged their work... leading to the development of the UW Solution, which forever changed the field of organ transplantation by allowing organs to be stored outside the body for an extended period. Our UW—Madison Chancellor Jennifer Mnookin

has benefited from this innovation. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, she donated a kidney to her father...and the UW Solution allowed the organ to be shipped from Los Angeles to Boston for successful transplantation.

All of these stories from the past are still written today by our faculty who continue to practice the Wisconsin Idea.

Now, I don't expect you to make a world-changing discovery during medical school...or do I? Or better said - I believe that you can, if your journey takes you there!

You will each take a personalized path during medical school. You may pursue a dual degree to broaden your expertise; train in rural or urban health through our WARM or TRIUMPH programs; or conduct research that finds cures for cancer and Alzheimer's, harnesses the power of AI for health, or explores how we might practice medicine in space. And please know we will be here to help guide you and support you on your path. And that we will have prepared you with the foundational skills.

While the journey may seem daunting at times, today is a first key step... the act of wearing your white coat is part of finding your ikigai [ee-kee-guy]!

AND THIS STEP comes with a great responsibility: to honor this privilege—to honor the respect and trust you will receive as a doctor—THAT YOU COMMIT TO care for a patient and their family, and HEAL them. But if you cannot HEAL THEM, you will ALWAYS provide COMPASSION to those who are suffering. THAT is the privilege that comes with wearing this white coat...and it's one that you will earn the right to wear proudly as you learn and train here.

BUT TODAY marks that FIRST STEP...the beginning of that lifelong journey, and one that I hope that you will remember as you find your professional ikigai. I make just one request: that you commit to ground your ikigai in our Wisconsin values of improving health: through dedication, hard work, collaboration, a dogged determination to fix problems...and of course, curiosity.

[slight pause]

Thank you all for joining us today, and it is an honor to be serving as dean. I look forward to following along on your journey. On, Wisconsin!

I now turn the stage back to Dr. Seibert [Sigh-ber].

(Back to seat)

WINNER: DEDICATION/GROUNDBREAKING CEREMONY SPEECH

“A Roll Call of the Righteous: Rededicating Historic Memorial Coliseum”

By Tiana Thé for Eli Capilouto,
President, University of Kentucky

//

Delivered at the Historic Memorial Coliseum,
Lexington, Kentucky, April 26, 2025

His tools were simple...
A steel-nibbed pen, an inkwell,
blank panels of paper five feet long and
four feet wide.

From September 1949 to March
1950, Professor Horine’s desk became
a kind of altar.

Beneath the steady glow of a draft-
ing lamp, he dipped his pen—again
and again and again—into the mid-
night ink.

Like a prayer in motion, Professor
Horine inscribed the names of
Kentucky’s fallen World War II
heroes...one by one...line by line...
county by county...

Not just a list, but a litany—carrying
the weight of our state’s grief.

And among those nearly 10,000
names is Franklin Sousley.

Franklin, a native of Hilltop,
Kentucky, helped tend the tobacco
fields and care for his family after his
father died.

He graduated high school at 17 and
soon after, became a marine.

****BRIEF PAUSE****

Franklin was just a boy...18 when he
shipped out.

And by 19 he was halfway around
the world crawling through the black
sands of Iwo Jima.

His unit, Easy Company, landed on
that small island on February 19th, 1945.

Franklin and the rest of the 28th
regiment spent the next four days
trudging inland as curtains of rain and
bullets pelted them.

But on the morning of February
23rd, the rain cleared, and the clouds
lifted, revealing Mount Suribachi—
black, volcanic, scarred...looming over
the beach where the marines landed on
just days before.

That morning, a patrol was sent up
the mountain with a small American
flag and a simple command...

“If you make it to the top, put it up.”
And miraculously, they did.

The American flag rose for the first
time over Iwo Jima, and the island
erupted with cheers instead of artillery.

But the Japanese held the tunnels
beneath Suribachi and swarmed the
celebrating marines with gunfire.

Still, it was over in just a few min-
utes—no loss of American life.

And the flag remained standing.

****BRIEF PAUSE****

Witnessing what happened from afar,
the secretary of the Navy was so deeply
moved he requested to take the flag as
a souvenir.

And after Easy Company took it
down, they were not satisfied...they
bled for that flag.

So, the regimental commander gave
the order to replace it.

“And this time,” he said, “make it
bigger.”

A new patrol of six was sent up the
charred mountain face with a replace-
ment flag—bigger, bolder and renewed
in purpose after being salvaged from a
sinking boat at Pearl Harbor.

And what happened next was un-
ceremonious—just marines completing
another task.

Two of them found a heavy pipe
and dragged it over the rubble to a
third, who was holding the neatly
folded flag with reverence and resolve.

Then together, the six young men
quietly began to raise the flag for a
second time.

And catching the movement out of
the corner of his eye, photographer
Joe Rosenthal quickly turned his lens

on instinct, worried that he would
miss it.

In 1/400th of a second, with barely
a chance to look, the shutter clicked.
No framing...no retakes...just the raw
contrast between the everlasting glory
of that image and the brevity of the
lives that made it monumental.

****BRIEF PAUSE****

And then, it was over.

The young men piled rocks around
the base of the pole and went back to
work, unaware that their impromptu
ritual would become one of the most
recognizable images of the world...one
for the ages:

Six marines. Tired, sweaty, caked in
the muck and ash of the battlefield...
caught mid-motion, raising the Ameri-
can flag.

And one of them, reaching above
his head to steady the very center of
the pole, is 19-year-old Franklin Sous-
ley of Hilltop, Kentucky.

He wrote to his mom, “Look for my
picture—I helped put the flag up.”

****PAUSE****

But one month later, Franklin was cut
down in battle by a sniper’s bullet.

Franklin and his fellow marines
didn’t know they’d never get to see
that photo.

They didn’t even know it was being
taken at the time.

In that moment, they only knew
the weight of the flag...of sacrifice and
hope...the feeling of the rough pipe
against their palms...the motion of lift-
ing—of raising a flag...a thing worth
holding onto...an ideal worth dying for.

Today, a statue immortalizing that
moment stands in Arlington, Virginia

atop a granite mount with an inscription reading,

“Uncommon valor was a common virtue.”

****BRIEF PAUSE****

Uncommon valor was a common virtue for that generation...

****BRIEF PAUSE****

These lives, and these moments—the raw and deeply human ones, born not of spectacle but of calling—are not meant to fade.

They are meant to be preserved... revered...immortalized.

Not only for what and who they were but for what they ask of us now...

To remember.

Because while those young heroes believed some things must be defended, they believed even fiercer that some things must never, ever happen again.

That is what they died for...

To end the extermination of people condemned to death in the name of racial and ideology purity.

That is what they died for—to restore democracies.

They fought against regimes that first burned books...

Then tore down truth...

Then stoked fear and hatred...

Then ripped families apart...

Then torched temples of worship...

Then dropped fire from the sky...

Then rounded up the Jews, the Roma, the gay and disabled and put them on trains destined for death.

Some 12 million perished.

****PAUSE****

But in the death camps, millions who would survive waited behind barbed wire, stripped of their humanity but clinging on to their personhood with hope...

Not knowing that deliverance would come in the form of boys...

Boys from Illinois and Idaho...Kansas and Kentucky...crawling through the mud to get to them...to liberate them.

****BRIEF PAUSE****

When the world was splintering, these brave souls who we remember today were the hinge of history...defending the idea that every human life has worth...no matter how it worships...or where it's lived...or who it loves.

With this beautiful, newly renovated memorial the names of Kentucky's fallen heroes, as inscribed by Professor Horine, from World War II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars and subsequent military service that used to hang on the walls in this hallowed hall, are now etched into metal, anchored in stone and placed right outside for all to clearly see, every hour, day or night.

And those names out there?...

That is a roll call of the righteous.

****BRIEF PAUSE****

We carve names in places we pass so legacy meets us where we live—so we can look on with reverence for those righteous souls who made the ultimate sacrifice as the greatest generation.

And from this time forward, I ask our students, as they pass these monuments, to stop, pause, pick a name—perhaps from your home county—say a prayer, reflect in gratitude.

And just beyond those etched names, another piece of history stands.

A marker—strong in presence and purpose—acknowledging a story we must also carry.

****BRIEF PAUSE****

Long before Memorial Coliseum was built, this ground was home to Adamstown—a vibrant Black community whose residents helped build the very foundation of this university and this city.

Families lived there...worshipped there...watched football games on porches across from the stadium they weren't allowed to enter.

And among them—Pierre Whiting, known to students as “Dean Whiting”—is believed to be the first African American employed by the university.

He carried water and mortar for the construction of Main Building in 1888 and ultimately, he became its keeper for 57 years.

He was a fixture of our campus. A witness to our history—a contributor to it at a time when so many were excluded from its telling.

The memorial that now honors Adamstown and Mr. Whiting is not a correction of history, but an extension of our commitment to fully tell it...

Because love of place requires truth...

And remembering requires courage...not just to honor the valor of those who served, but to face the realities of who and what was neglected along the way.

****LONG PAUSE****

****SOFTER****

As Professor Horine made his way through the seemingly unending list of the fallen, he came across a name he knew by heart...

Corporal John Horine.

Lost over the Adriatic Sea.

20 years of age.

Never recovered.

And yet, just as he had done thousands of times before, Professor Horine dipped his steel-nibbed pen in the midnight ink and wrote the name of his eldest son with no greater flourish, no heavier hand than any other.

He knew they were all some mother and father's child...

They were all sons of Kentucky.

That is the quiet truth of this memorial...

That what binds these names is not how they died but how they were loved...

How they are honored...and how we will remember them.

And love and duty—when bound together—become something holy.

****PAUSE****

During the Memorial Coliseum's 1950 dedication, President Donovan remarked, "This is a house... This is Kentucky's Coliseum... It belongs to the people."

For 160 years, we have served Kentucky and her people with deep fidelity to our mission.

Through wars and recessions, pandemics and deep divide, we remain standing.

We've helped our Commonwealth get healthier, wealthier, wiser...and we will continue to advance that mission because that is what we were created to do...

That is our enduring promise as Kentucky's university.

And that is the power of people coming together, united by common purpose, to do uncommonly good and important things.

And today, with gratitude to the general assembly, the governor and many donors who made essential funds available for this project, we rededicate this hallowed place and call on the next generation to cherish and extend a precious legacy.

Thank you.

WINNER: EMPLOYEE MEETING

"The Heart of the Matter"

By Trish Hendrix and John Curry for John Curry,
Managing Partner, New York Life



Delivered at New York Life's 2025 Partners Meeting,
Washington, D.C., April 7, 2025

It is an honor and privilege to be here with you today.

It's a pretty impressive footprint Long Island has left on this company, over the years!

- In 2024, the Long Island GO paid for almost 20,000 new clients...

- We have a total of 2.2 BILLION in total assets under management

- But here's my favorite number of all: Last year alone, our office placed over 5.7 Billion dollars of Life insurance and delivered over \$150 million in death benefits.

It takes an incredible team effort to make numbers like that happen. They pulled out all the stops to capture the Chairman's Trophy.

Thank you for allowing me to represent you up here. This one's for you!

Congratulations to all the offices that won trophies.

We should all feel proud about what the trophies stand for—the impact we have on the communities where we live and work.

And every person in this room gets to be part of that mission.

But like everyone else, our office has had major challenges. We still have a long way to go for me to feel like we are anywhere close to our potential.

Frankly, COVID set us back a few years.

I remember "buying into" the sales management dream so many years ago—

First, you build: Recruiting, filling the seats with talent, and giving them what they need to succeed.

Then, you build and grow: Still recruiting but also creating culture, challenging and inspiring everyone to aim higher as a team.

And then you get to a point where you have built, grown, and now you get to maintain—to focus your efforts where they have the greatest impact and create opportunities for others to take on more of a leadership role.

In other words, "If you do what you have to do when you have to do it, someday you can do what you want to do when you want to do it."

Well, in early 2020, I thought I was there, Reap the rewards, "maintain mode"—I arrived!

But—NO!

Due to Covid, I saw our positive, team-like spirit of being in the office every day together disappear.

We had just opened a 135,000 sq ft office, a training room that fits 400 people with an overflow training room

to fit another 100. But we had to go into lockdown. Suddenly, we're recruiting, training, and developing—all on Zoom.

We had to learn the business in a whole new, different way. As did everyone in this room.

Now, don't get me wrong—we all developed some great skills. But I often felt like Dori in Finding Nemo! "Just keep swimming, just keep swimming, just keep swimming, swimming, swimming. The tides will turn. Don't let the current take you out to sea!"

Well, two years later, the tide finally started to change, and we returned to our offices—and that's when the "rebuild" process began.

Some managers are builders. Some are growers. The best are builders AND growers. But no one intends to have to "rebuild." It was not part of the management vision—nor the training, for that matter. And going into rebuild mindset is a lot different than the exciting "build and growth" mindset. Especially for larger, successful offices, where you're used to driving that "growth" mindset.

Thankfully, the Long Island established agents' business is substantially up. And we do have a strong Freshman and Sophomore class—the ones hired after we returned to the office.

But just like a division 1 college athletic team, it's hard to win a championship with just a couple of strong classes. And some of the agents hired during the pandemic still haven't hit their stride. They didn't start their careers surrounded by that team-like spirit and camaraderie you get in person. (We all know there's nothing like that energy. Like what's in this room here now—right?)

So, we are doing everything we can to make them feel that culture now—to connect them with each other and with more established agents.

We want to retain those agents, so to some extent, we have to “re-train” those agents. That is part of the rebuilding process. And of course, so is recruiting. We're giving it all we've got, to grow our offices—to keep everyone pumped and energized. Because the boiling point is what moves the locomotive—so we are recruiting and developing as much, if not more, than we ever have. Every day, we go after it.

Because in my opinion, there are few careers that are more important than what we do.

I'd like to share with you a little bit about how I came into this business.

My first child was born when I was 18 years old—so, I had a family to support at a young age. I juggled four jobs to make ends meet. I was working 75, 80 hours a week

—but getting nowhere. Growing up, I was a pretty good athlete—(well, the older I get, the better I was, I suppose!)—usually a captain or the first one picked. I was also fairly musical. But by the time I was 23 years old, I was not feeling very good about where I was in life. So, I talked to one of my older brothers and he shared some advice.

He told me, “Successful people focus on one thing a thousand times a day. Victims do a thousand different things one time a day.” Then he said, “Look at the ceiling. There are 30 light bulbs in this room. They're 200 watts each. But if we took those 30 light bulbs and combined them into one, it would be a 6,000 watt light bulb. Like a laser beam, it would burn a hole right

through this table. And that's what you need to be: laser focused,” he told me. “You need to keep working 75, 80 hours a week—but you need to have just one career, not four jobs. Be your best by focusing on one thing.

Not long after that conversation, he sent me a blind newspaper ad. It said: Fortune 100 company, Athletes preferred. Coaching and teaching abilities, most of all drive, Communication skills a must. This lucrative position has an excellent Executive benefits package. Management potential. For someone with a family to support, it sounded great. But I was a Phys Ed major, working the night shift at a hospital for benefits; doing construction by day. I was also a varsity football and lacrosse coach. I did not think a Fortune 100 company would hire me.

My brother said, “Seek and you might find, knock and the door may open, ask and you may receive—but if you don't, you won't.” So, I applied.

I did not come in the business because of what we do. Nor why we do it. I came into the business because of the gentleman I interviewed with, the things that were said, and how the process went. Now, this guy looked good. He looked like he stepped out of *GQ* magazine: Diamond gold Rolex, owned a Porsche, and he told me he made \$100,000 a month working 40-50 efficient hours a week. This was in 1990!

Back then, I was very shy. Actually, it's probably hard to believe that I am still a fairly shy guy. But when I put my uniform on—my suit and tie—I become a different person. Because it's not about me and my feelings, anymore—it's about everyone else and their feelings. But during this interview, I was quiet, my legs were shaking, and I didn't make very good eye contact. I was also wearing a black suit with sleeves that were too long, a black tie, black shirt, black shoes, and white socks. (My wife said I looked handsome!)

Well, this gentleman mocked me a little, compared my outfit to Michael Jackson—and then, after a few minutes, he told me “I don't think you'll

make it in this business”—and ended the interview!

As I got to the door, I turned around and said, “Sir, I don't even know what you do for a living, but I will work as hard as anyone you've ever met—and if you can do it, I can do it. And I promise you this, if you are working 40 hours a week, I'll work 80 hours a week. And if I put in twice your hours, even if I'm half as good as you, I could take care of my mother, my wife and my children—and give them the lives I want to give them.”

After a moment, he said, “Why did you bring up your mother? Why would you need to take care of your mother?”

I told him, “My dad was the President, Chairman, and CEO of a bank at a very young age. But on July 24th, 1978—one week before he turned 40—he died of a massive heart attack and never came home again. I was 12 years old.”

“That day, everything changed. My mother lost her best friend, the love of her life—and life as she knew it, because my dad left her with six children and no financial security. I was the youngest son. My mother started working overnight in a nursing home so she could be there when I went to bed at night, and she could get me off to school in the morning. My older siblings all went to work to support the family. No more sports, no more extracurricular activities for them. I have the best siblings and mother ever, but nothing was ever the same after the day my dad died.”

He listened to my story. And then he said, “I'm sorry to hear that. Come back in here. Sit down.”

I sat back down. He fist-bumped me (I'm not sure that was “a thing” in the 90s, but it's what he did!)

Then he said, “My dad also died of a massive heart attack, but I was 14 years old.”

I said, “I'm sorry to hear that.”

He said, “But my dad did things differently than your dad. My dad had life insurance and a financial plan. So, my mom still lives in the same home. She's retired and financially she's just fine. And all of us kids went to college on

my dad. I'm sorry that your dad didn't do that for you and your family."

I have to tell you; it felt like he hit me with a two by four. He didn't mean it as a personal dig, but I felt it very personally.

You see, he had that same motivation as me—driven by losing a dad at a young age—but he'd experienced it from the other side...the positive side of what our business can do.

I don't know if it was the fact that we had both lost our dads at a young age—or if he just had a hunch that my experience would light a fire in me to succeed—but he did end up hiring me.

35 years later, here I am!

That talk was my first look at what our lives could have been like if only a financial advisor that my dad liked, trusted, and respected had reached out to him—or at least set an appointment to discuss how much he loved his family and motivated him to set up a holistic financial plan.

And not long into my career, I witnessed first-hand the impact of what we do. It was the day I delivered my first death-claim check.

In my opinion, the career really comes to life the day you deliver "the" check. Because that is the "why" of what we do—that moment when somebody needs that life, long-term care, disability income check... or when they retire and need that annuity income. The day someone needs that check is the day they need their agent/advisor more than anything.

And with just three months in the business, I delivered a check to an elderly widow.

It was snowing, it was late at night—and she was more than an hour away. The servicing agent approached me and asked me if I would go in his place. He was a top producer, and he told me that we would split any future planning we did. So, I went.

It took much longer than expected. There were no cell phones back then, so I couldn't call and say I was running late. When I arrived, a couple of women came to the door and said,

"Who are you?" I said, "I'm John Curry and I'm here to see..." (I don't remember her name, but we'll call her "Betty.") I told them, "She knows I'm coming." "You're late," they said. I was like, "I'm sorry—It took an hour and a half in the snow to get here." I heard a voice call out from in the house, "Is that the life insurance guy? Let him in."

I sat with "Betty" in the kitchen, a frail older woman. I'd never delivered a death benefit check before. There was no training on how to deliver a check. So, I just handed it to her. She looked at it. Then, after a moment, she put her hand on my hand. She said, "Honey, you made a mistake, and I don't want you to get in trouble. It's only supposed to be \$5,000, not \$50,000."

My heart dropped to my stomach. I didn't know what to do. So, I pulled my thoughts together. I said to her, "Well, here's the policy. Let's look." And we checked. Everything was in print with her husband's signature. And I showed her: "Look—the check is correct. This policy is for \$50,000."

She looked at me and said, "Really?" She couldn't believe it. She then got very emotional and started crying. This frail old lady leaned over and gave me a hug.

It felt like a thirty-minute hug; it was probably only 30 seconds. I didn't know what to do because she was crying, so, I was lightly patting her back.

"Betty" then said, "This is the ultimate love letter!"

Her friends came in and said, "What did you say to her, why is she crying?" "Betty" told them, "He's an angel sent from Heaven." That lady called me an angel sent from heaven!

And then she showed them the check and told them, "Look—my husband still loves me! And for the rest of my life, I'll get this love letter from him every month. The most selfless gift he could ever give me."

It blew me away when she said that. I never forgot that day. It forever changed how I viewed this business and what we do. After that, it was not

about making money or paying my bills. It was about giving people the opportunity to have financial security and financial independence.

It was about delivering the ultimate love letter, the most selfless gift anyone can give.

Since that day, I use "Betty's" phrase all the time: the idea of life insurance being the ultimate love letter. Life insurance is Love insurance! I say this when I'm talking to clients, agents, and recruits. People always respond to it emotionally!! Because you can't say it better than that.

Ultimately, our business is about four things: Protection, accumulation, distribution, and legacy. And we can help our clients with all of these. So that's what I drive.

I've never forgotten my brother's advice about staying focused on one purpose, a thousand times a day. So, I recruit several hours a day. I drive client acquisition—through holistic advice and guidance—several hours a day. I create and maintain a positive team-like atmosphere so our agents/advisors never want to leave—so that they can be there in the future to keep all their promises to their clients. (I do that several hours a day)

These are the main things. And as I always say, "You have to keep the main things, the main things."

As long as we stay focused on that, nothing else matters. But if we DON'T stay focused on that, nothing else matters.

I find it important to demonstrate desired behaviors. I believe more in "Do as I say and do," not just "Do as I say!" And that includes passion, enthusiasm, and commitment. People don't often remember exactly what you say, but they do remember how you say it and how you make them feel. But that has to be backed up by action. "Once people understand the WHY, they often Buy!"

I believe that the best things we can ever give our agents and leadership team are great habits. Leading from the front. Being willing to do the things you are asking others to do. I pride

myself on being an “in the trenches” leader. I want to be in on the action with the rest of the team. I want to give them the tools to succeed.

For example, there is a brilliant on-the-basics sales talk, focused on the goal that is most near and dear to my heart: Making sure that every family can remain living in their home after the death of a bread winner. I give this talk to agents, I use it in recruiting, and my agents/advisors share it with their clients. It is simple, but it has been effective, especially on Zoom, screen-sharing through Covid! It’s a bit of an old school throw back, but here it is:

Sales Idea: Family A and Family B

This is called Family A. Family B. Let’s say Family A has a mom, has a dad, 2 children, and a house with a mortgage. Mom is a nurse that makes \$80,000 a year and she has a retirement plan and health benefits. Dad’s in construction and also makes \$80,000 a year. Dad uses his wife’s health benefits and doesn’t have a retirement plan at his job—they’re both using hers. Every penny they saved, they put as a down payment on the house but still owe \$450,000 on it. Someday, they want to redo the kitchen and floors but can’t afford it yet.

Now, Mom has died. Dad’s love of his life, the mother of his children, his best friend, his partner is no longer here. He is emotionally devastated. But he’s also terrified, thinking ‘What am I going to do? We were making \$160,000 a year together and I just lost half of it. I have to come up with \$25,000 to bury my wife. And we have to go on Cobra, which is going to cost me at least another \$20,000. What am I going to do?’

Dad has to get two jobs. By the way, mom was getting the kids off to school after her shift ended. And Dad picked them up and coached the soccer team. Now he’s got two jobs. The kids lost their mother. They now lost their soccer coach. Here’s the other thing they lost: They lost their dad physically and mentally. When he’s home, he’s very, very cranky.

All the kids want is for dad to be there to rub their backs and say things are going to be okay.

But Daddy’s not there. Daddy had to get a second job. Even with that job, they can’t keep up with the mortgage and eventually have to move. Now they lose their school, their soccer team, their friends. You get the idea.

And this kind of thing happens all the time with families all over the country.

Now, let’s talk about Family B. They are the same as Family A with one important distinction: They had the good fortune to meet with one of your agents.

Your sister was a nurse, so she introduced you to the Mom. Same exact mom. \$80,000 salary, retirement plan and health benefits. Here’s the difference: You got in front of her and you asked her who and what are most important? Of course, she said her family. She would do anything to protect her family.

‘What about financially?’ ‘What do you mean?’ ‘Well, if your income were to stop, would you like your family to be able to remain financially stable until the kids are out of college, and at a decent standard of living?’ ‘Well, of course I would.’ ‘Simple math is you’re making \$80,000 a year times 20 years. You need \$1.6 million of life insurance on your life. Not including any inflation factor whatsoever.’

‘Oh my Gosh! That’s a ridiculous amount. I had no idea. I can’t afford that. I can’t afford that.’ ‘Let me tell you, 30-year-old, \$1.6 million of term life insurance. You’re talking about \$30 a month. It’s a dollar a day. Less than you may pay for your daily coffee or DoorDash each month.’ ‘I had no idea. How come I didn’t know?’ ‘Because you never met me before.’

Mom B puts \$1.6 million in place. Don’t worry. We’re going to talk about college funding, we’re going to talk about retirement planning, we’re going to talk about estate planning. We are going to build from the foundation up. But right here, protection first.

Guess what happened? Mom died. Guess what we did?

We delivered a \$1.6 million check to dad. Dad’s emotionally wrecked. His wife just died. But he doesn’t have to worry about how he is going to pay the bills. He doesn’t have to get a second job, so he can be there for his kids. They are able to stay in their house and community, keep their friends, and still have Dad as a coach. They even have savings for college. Mom left them with the ultimate love letter.

Now, if you or anyone in your community could be Family A or Family B, which family would they choose to be? We’d all choose Family B. But although we’d all want to be Family B, there are a lot uninsured or underinsured people out there. If those families were to lose a key breadwinner, they could end up like Family A and lose everything.

Our agents are here to make sure that doesn’t happen. And when that protection IS in place, the peace of mind it brings is indescribable. I know—because I have also personally experienced it on the other side, too. And when I say “the other side”—I mean it.

On May 26th, 2020—on my birthday and at the height of COVID, I had a massive heart attack.

I had been training for a triathlon; it was the day after Memorial Day. I was going for a jog and I started to feel a lot of tingling from my chest down to my fingers. It didn’t hurt. It wasn’t like an elephant standing on my chest; it was like when your foot falls asleep. But then I started sweating and feeling very nauseous. I knew something was very wrong.

My wife Holly immediately told me we need to go to the ER. I of course did not want to go. I needed to work that day. But we called my sister, who has worked in health care, and she said to get to the Emergency Room. Holly took me to the hospital.

Upon arriving at the hospital, I was told I was having a massive heart attack.

They started to wheel me into a room with a lot of lights, and they

started working on me. By then, I was pretty out-of-it because of the IV with the “happy” pain meds. I was in La La land, so I didn’t really know what was going on.

But then, I started to feel unbelievable tension around me. It got very intense....I heard people getting loud with each other in the room.

Suddenly, my body was jolted, and I was going up and down on the table—I was paddled several times. They did it again and again—and I started thinking, ‘Holy smokes—wait a minute. Am I dying?’

I don’t remember having fear, but feeling very confused. Then I got a little angry and thought to myself, ‘God, what are you doing? I’m healthy. I’m a good guy!’ But then I remembered how my mother always said that you can never be angry at God. And that we can’t control what happens to us, but two things we can control are our actions and our reactions. So, I thought, ‘Well, I may be seeing God in the next couple of seconds, so I better change the way I’m thinking!’ I totally changed my demeanor, my attitude.

I started feeling a little sad. But then I thought about what was by far most important in my life. I thought about my wife Holly. I thought about my four children. I thought about my mother. (Don’t tell my mother she was third!)

And then, I suddenly felt very peaceful and calm.

Here’s why: I realized that no matter what happened to me, things were going to be okay for my family. I knew that Holly would never have to go through what my mother went through. My wife and family would be taken care of. They wouldn’t be hurting financially on top of hurting emotionally.

Emotional devastation does not necessarily bring financial devastation—but financial devastation ALWAYS brings emotional devastation. And my family would be spared that.

Because the wonderful people I work with—people like ALL of you, in this room—would show up at my

door. They would hug my wife, and say, ‘John loves you. Every month for the rest of your life you will get the ultimate love letter.’ When they hugged my children, they would say, ‘Daddy loves you and loves your mother.’ (That is music to a child’s ear.) And when they hugged my mother, they’d say, ‘John loves you—and you did a heck of a job raising your son. Here is a check to pay off your condo!’ Then they would deliver the ultimate love letters to my family: financial security and financial independence for the people I love.

And knowing all of that gave me the greatest sense of peace.

Those were the last thoughts and feelings I had—but then I started hearing beep, beep, beep. I realized I could feel the atmosphere in the room lighten up. I don’t know if people high-fived each other, but there was a definite sense of relief—like, ‘Okay, he’s back!’

It turns out I had flatlined. My heart had stopped for almost 75 seconds. I had survived the deadly “widow maker blockage” and immediately needed four stents.

When I told the doctors what I’d heard, and felt, and thought—they said, “John, you couldn’t possibly remember all that because your heart stopped beating for over a minute. You were dead.”

I told them, “Well—have you ever been dead before? Because I’m telling you right now, I know exactly what I felt. I remember it as if it were yesterday.”

I didn’t have an “out of body” experience. I just remember my emotions and my thoughts—and I remember feeling at peace. And what I felt the most at peace about was knowing that my wife, my children, my mother were all going to be okay financially.

As a child, I experienced Family A. But as an adult—and because of what we do—I’ve built Family B.

BTW, one year later, it happened again. This time I knew the feeling and went to the Doctor immediately. Now I have eight stents in this young heart of mine.

I’m all good and I’m not going anywhere. I may be a bit more sensitive and emotional, a bit of a mush nowadays, but I do my darnedest to stay in great shape. Holly and I are running a 15-mile race next month. (We get to watch our son train daily for an Ironman, so it’s kind of hard not to be inspired to exercise ourselves!)

There is one last thing I’d like to discuss with you. It’s about our four major competitors. I like to call them the **BIG FOUR!**

No, we’re not talking about other financial companies...

Our #1 competitor by far is called **DEATH!** Death is going to get us all. We need to get out there and give everyone we’ve ever met, and everyone we will ever meet, the chance to become our clients before they become our #1 competitor’s client. Death has a 100% closing ratio. They are very good at what they do!

Our #2 competitor is called **OLD AGE.** If death doesn’t get you first, old age will. We must give people an opportunity to have guaranteed income so that they can have a decent standard of living and dignity as they age—and not outlive their money.

#3 is **ILLNESS.** We must give people an opportunity to get long-term care insurance before long-term illness gets them.

#4 is **DISABILITY.** According to the Social Security Administration, about 1 in 4 of today’s 20-year-olds will become disabled before reaching age 67. We must give people the opportunity to own Disability insurance.

Once people become our competitors’ clients, it’s too late for them. And their families.

It could have been too late for me. Due to my heart, I can’t get these products anymore. But I made sure I was protected against the four competitors years ago! And once you have these products, they can’t be taken away. So, let’s all get out there and drive our Mission!

THAT, my friends, is what we get to do for people every day. It is what our

industry makes possible. It is why we do what we do.

I want everyone to know that the struggles are worth it.

It is worth it to have moments like when I delivered that check to the widow so many years ago, when she cried on my shoulder and called me an angel from Heaven...

It is worth it to know that the peace of mind I felt in that hospital can also be experienced by others, in their final moments, because of what we do...

It is worth it to know that as leaders, we not only change the lives of our clients—but we also change the lives of the people we bring into this business. I have seen people enjoy success, and a lifestyle and flexibility they never thought possible, because of the many opportunities this career affords them.

I am a living example of that.

But there are still so many... too many families and businesses out there who need the products and services we offer. That is what drives me.

My job—OUR job—is to get everyone in our offices to remember why we are here:

- The ultimate love letters we can help write and deliver.
- The dreams we can make possible through financial security.
- The people who can retire with a comfortable standard of living.
- The “Family A’s” we can turn into “Family B’s” before it’s too late.

THAT is the impact we can have on the communities we serve. It’s important to understand it—but it’s even more important to feel it.

So, let’s all live with that conviction, each and every day.

Because passion is contagious. And the more people we touch, the more lives we change.

I’d like to call up the people that motivate and inspire me, every day:

- my wife Holly
- my son Sean
- my daughter-in-law Nicole
- my little granddaughter Sonie
- my son Devin
- and my daughter Shannon.

Can my incredible family please come up on stage?

And our extended family: The Long Island General Office leadership team—our EPs, SPs, Partners—and our COO—come on up!

Thank you for all that you do. Let’s keep changing lives together!

WINNER: EULOGY/TRIBUTE SPEECH

“The Meekness of True Strength”

Written and delivered by Joe Myers,
Speechwriter, Department of Veterans Affairs



Delivered at United States Military Academy,
West Point, New York, July 1, 2025

Good morning, everyone. Distinguished guests, friends & family, cadre of Task Force Avery, and most importantly, Air Assault graduates. I’m honored to share this day with you.

I want to especially thank Cadet Lemler for doing so much to keep Garrison Avery’s memory alive with this Task Force that bears his name, and for inviting me to speak about his life and legacy.

I know the excitement and pride you’re feeling today. In the summer of 2002, I was roster number 312 in one of the graduating classes down the river at Camp Smith. I know how challenging this training is, both physically and mentally. So, I want to congratulate you on earning your wings.

I was blessed to train and go to war with many remarkable people during my time in the Army. And first among

them was the man your Task Force is named after this year, First Lieutenant Garrison Charles Avery. I knew him simply as Gary. He was my best friend.

We met while getting smoked by upperclassmen in the sinks of Grant Barracks, “Reorg Week” 2000. We were Plebe Year roommates and Sandhurst teammates. From the start, Gary had a serene grace to his movements and demeanor.

His accomplishments were certainly impressive: Cadet Company First Sergeant, Sapper School, Ranger School. He completed Special Forces Assessment & Selection as a cadet, among the top of the class.

But that wasn’t what made him remarkable. And it’s not what I want to talk about today. I want to share with you the qualities that made Gary a person his peers wanted to emulate, and his Soldiers wanted to follow.

General MacArthur said that the ‘great moral code’ of Duty, Honor, Country teaches you to remember “the simplicity of true greatness, the open mind of true wisdom, the meekness of true strength.” That’s a perfect summary of Gary Avery.

First, the simplicity of true greatness. Gary came to West Point from Nebraska. His modesty and quiet strength were true to that humble patch of America, and of his loving parents, Gary and Susan. When I think back on our time as cadets, it’s the little acts of generosity that stand out to me. Staying up late working physics problems on my wardrobe doors the night before an exam; lightly tapping on my door at 0530 to go practice the Indoor Obstacle Course at Hayes Gym; or blowing off whatever he had planned in the afternoon to work on rope bridges with my company Sandhurst

team. These little acts of humble devotion are what I carry with me when I remember Gary.

Next, the open mind of true wisdom. Gary was driven by practical knowledge and working with his hands. If it seemed useful, he wanted to learn it. His knowledge of cars served him well one night returning to post in someone else's Jeep. When it broke down on the side of the road, Gary was able to fix it, in the dark, without tools. This resourcefulness became legendary and earned him the nickname of MacGyver, which is carved on his headstone in the West Point Cemetery.

And Gary also thought deeply about warfare and the nature of conflict at the strategic level. The September 11th attacks occurred during our Yearling year. We spent three years watching the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq develop and would often discuss them over a burger and beer at the Firstie Club ... the growing insurgencies ... what was at the root of it? ... how could we counter it? Occasionally we'd jot ideas on a napkin. Things like setting up arcades to get Iraqi kids off the streets, or starting a small jobs program, a "New Deal" for Iraq.

I cherished sharing ideas with him. And Gary must've too. Months after his death—his beloved wife Kayla was going through their strongbox. There piled between birth certificates and mortgage documents was a neatly

folded napkin with scribbles of arcades and small jobs programs. She mailed it to me, and I have it framed in my office.

Finally, the meekness of true strength. When Gary showed up to D Company, First of the 502nd in the 101st Airborne Division, his Company Commander, Lou Kangas, noted that he was quiet, but confident as a leader. When Gary's unit deployed to Iraq in 2005, to an area south of Baghdad known as the "Triangle of Death", he led his Soldiers and sought out the enemy in the most dangerous conditions. He also took time to get to know the local tribal elders. Their problems and concerns became his problems and concerns. He took particular interest in the children at the elementary school. The building was run down, no plumbing or electricity. It pained him that such small children, who had no say in the matter, were forced to live, learn, and play in such harsh conditions. So, he decided to organize a toy drive to bring some joy into their little hearts.

On February 1st, 2006, an IED struck Gary's vehicle during a patrol. He died alongside Specialist Marlon Bustamante and Private First Class Caesar Viglienza.

A year and a half later, an element of the 10th Mountain Division took over that area south of Baghdad. Our classmate, Nick Ziemba, was with that unit. One day the local Sheikhs spoke

of a "Luu-tent Afry" and asked if he knew him. They had tears in their eyes and recounted numerous stories of how this lieutenant recognized their potential and worked to make the area safe for their children. It took a minute, but Nick realized they were talking about Gary. It had been four-and-a-half years since the start of the Iraq War when Nick met with those Sheikhs. Countless Americans had come into their lives, and left once their deployment was over. And yet they still remembered Gary with emotion.

When I heard this story—I was struck by the notion that it was Gary's simple human decency which turned out to be the greatest weapon he wielded in war, and the greatest gift he continues to give in memory.

The simplicity of true greatness. The open mind of true wisdom. The meekness of true strength. That was Gary.

Always remember that it's the simple acts of selflessness that you do for your peers, your Soldiers, and those you protect, that they will remember forever. That's the true currency of leadership.

Again, congratulations on earning your wings. And from the bottom of my heart, thank you for the opportunity to share this day with you.

Air Assault. And Beat Navy.

WINNER: INAUGURAL SPEECH

“What Our Patients Deserve”

By Jeffrey Crooks for Bobby Mukkamala, MD,
President, American Medical Association



Delivered at the AMA 2025 Annual Meeting,
Chicago, June 10, 2025

Good evening and thank you. It is an incredible honor to address all of you for the first time as the president of the American Medical Association—and to do so surrounded by family, friends and colleagues who are so dear to me.

Many of you have traveled great distances to be with us tonight, and it means so much to me that you are here.

I have thought a lot about this moment—and what it would feel like to stand at this podium, under these bright lights, with so many distinguished leaders in medicine, so many mentors, seated behind me.

To call this moment humbling doesn't capture it. It's moving. It's awe-inspiring.

It's motivating because you feel like the world of medicine has placed an enormous responsibility on your shoulders to speak for our entire profession, to call attention to the challenges our patients face, and to illuminate the very common frustrations that are driving physicians away from medicine.

A few months ago, I didn't know if this night would even be possible.

As I lay in recovery from brain surgery at the Mayo Clinic, with tubes and wires monitoring my every movement, this night—this honor—this opportunity to improve health care seemed a very distant dream.

I am here tonight because of the brilliance of many skilled physicians, because of the enduring love and patience of my family and friends, and because our health care system, for all its flaws—and there are many—is still the best in the world for people like me.

But that is not true for everyone. Most patients who walk through our doors have a much different experience.

Will insurance cover this procedure?
How much is this medication?

How long do I have to wait to see a specialist for this lump in my neck?

These are questions that a vast majority of patients have to ask themselves. They experience a system that is ailing and in serious trouble.

Like me, our health system needs the input of many skilled physicians—physician leaders across every state and specialty—who are working together with incredible purpose and urgency.

It needs the AMA more than ever ... leaders in our profession speaking with one firm and commanding voice.

Our patients deserve better.

Our physicians deserve better.

Our nation deserves better.

The importance of access to physician care is very much on my mind tonight. Right now, in order to save dollars from the federal budget, many in government are seeking to cut basic health insurance from the most vulnerable in our communities. From the kind of people I see every day in my practice in Flint.

Another reason I am here and able to take the presidential oath tonight is because of the incredible advancements our nation has made in biomedical research and medical treatments that simply would not have been possible without the brilliance of physicians and scientists and considerable financial investments by our government.

In fact, the medicine I'm currently taking—an IDH inhibitor—to help prevent growth and maybe even shrink my residual brain cancer, is a drug that was developed through a close partnership between pharmaceutical companies, academic researchers, and the National Institutes of Health—with major government-funded support.

Millions of people like me, none of whom have this privilege, this stage,

and this microphone are alive tonight thanks to decades of government investment into research and exploratory science at leading universities and institutes. We cannot lose sight of what medicine and science have achieved in our lifetimes.

And we cannot abandon this progress and endanger the health of millions whose illnesses could have been treated had we stayed on course.

This is not a path toward greatness ... it is retreating from our moral obligation to provide compassionate care for all who need it.

We owe a tremendous debt to those who've blazed a path so that we could walk.

I stand here tonight on the shoulders I quite literally stood on as a kid, those of my parents, Apparao and Sumathi, two immigrants from India who settled in this country believing it offered them—and their future children—opportunities that simply were not possible at home.

They made great sacrifices to come to the U.S. in the early 1970s without knowing anyone. Without a community to guide them. They practiced medicine and cared for patients at a time when our country desperately needed it.

They are part of a generation of immigrants—like those before them and those who still cross our borders today—who, perhaps more than anyone else, believe in what has long been called The American Dream.

They see our patchwork nation as a fertile land of near limitless opportunities, and they give back by building communities—and raising their children to be leaders and to help others.

It was my parents who, let's say—gently—nudged me to pursue medicine

after I briefly flirted with becoming a broadcast journalist.

And my family's story begins in our hometown of Flint, Michigan, a small Midwestern city whose growth, decline, and resurrection symbolize the very worst and best of our nation.

Flint is a city with a national reputation that simply does not paint the full picture. It has been my home throughout my life. A place where communities have struggled and rebuilt. A city with an underdog mentality—a tenacity—that constantly works toward a better future.

The Flint my parents arrived in was a bustling, thriving city thanks to the General Motors automotive plant that provided a steady paycheck and a good life for tens of thousands of residents. It was brimming with shopping and great restaurants downtown. It was quite a culture shock for my parents, who both grew up in farming families in rural India.

Becoming a doctor was a dream for many children in India—a dream that both of my parents had, but not one that was easily attainable.

My father's father owned a small farm—just 30 acres of land. And he sold that land—acre by acre—each year to earn the money to put his children through school. By the time my father graduated, all the land was gone.

Through hard work and the considerable sacrifice of their families, both of my parents achieved their dreams of becoming physicians—my father a radiologist and my mother a pediatrician. Married at the age of 25, they left India in pursuit of a better life.

A decade later, the Flint of my childhood was quite different. The major automotive plants had closed. People were losing scores of jobs and fleeing the city. Investments dried up, and along with it, so did the civic pride that once defined our city.

I too left Flint in 1988 to attend medical school at the University of Michigan, where I met a brilliant and beautiful young woman whose passion for medicine exceeded her initial passion for me. But I eventually wore her down.

After medical school and residency right here in Chicago, Nita and I returned to Flint, this time with newborn twin boys. We set up our independent practice determined to help the community that raised me and be part of our city's triumphant rebirth.

It was one of the most rewarding and challenging decisions I've ever made.

Post-industrial Flint had—and still has—incredible and heartbreaking health disparities. Widespread poverty, community disinvestment, and a man-made disaster of deteriorating lead pipes have contributed to high rates of obesity, chronic disease, cancers, infant and maternal mortality, and other conditions that paint a pretty bleak picture of health.

Life expectancy in Flint is about 12 years shorter than its suburbs

Nita, as an OBGYN, and I, as an otolaryngologist, see these health disparities up close. We live them with our patients, and we want for them what every physician wants for those in our care:

Longer, healthier lives.

Timely access to care.

Abundant healthy foods, a steady paycheck, and quality schools.

Health coverage that makes that care affordable instead of the number one cause of bankruptcy.

So, I ask myself, is the health system we have today capable of addressing the health needs for the people of Flint? The health needs of people anywhere in America?

Physicians, especially those like Nita and me in private practice, face extraordinary financial pressures just to keep our doors open.

Many have had to make difficult choices to lay off staff, or limit the number of Medicare or Medicaid patients they see, or to close their practices altogether. And when they do, it exacerbates an already crippling physician shortage in the U.S. that is likely to get much worse over the next decade.

Where are our patients supposed to turn?

A couple weeks before I was scheduled to fly to Mayo for brain surgery,

a patient called me to schedule a follow up appointment for an ENT issue she had. I told her I would unfortunately be unable to see her for at least the next six weeks while I recovered from surgery.

After checking her options to see other ENTs in our area, she decided it would be quicker to just wait for me to return.

To return from brain surgery!

She didn't know—none of us could know—if I would even be able to practice medicine on the other side of this. In fact, I wrote a note to my office and operating room staff thanking them for 25 years of working together, in case there wasn't a 26th.

But that's the state of medicine today.

Too few physicians, stretched far too thin, attempting to care for a growing patient population but instead dealing with computer and phone “permissions.”

Like many of you, prior authorization hassles with insurance companies, even over the most routine of treatments like insulin for diabetics, are an endless frustration for me, my small staff, and our patients.

A few months ago, my staff had to call an insurer about a prior authorization issue because “Mukkamala” wasn't coming up as a provider in their system.

I've been in practice for 25 years and yet, somehow, I wasn't on the list of the largest insurer in our state?

This is not a sustainable health care model.

It is unnecessarily complicated.

And I'm afraid it only gets worse from here if we cannot press Congress and policymakers to address the most egregious failures of our current system and put health care back on solid ground.

This won't happen by accident.

This won't happen because members of Congress suddenly have an “epiphany” that they are failing physicians and patients and worsening the deep health divides in our nation.

It only happens because physicians, in great numbers, stand up and demand that it happens.

That is the work of the AMA.

That is the work across organized medicine and physicians in every state who are in the trenches with us.

Our patients and our colleagues are why we fight.

And why we will continue to fight until our health care system truly reflects the values of our profession.

Compassion.

Access.

A respect for human dignity and rights.

We have a long way to go. But I'm committed to this work, and I'm ready for this fight.

The AMA continues to sound the alarm about what two decades of declining Medicare payment to physicians is doing to independent practices and its disastrous ripple effects across health care.

We continue to call attention to the worsening physician shortage, driven by excessive administrative burdens and busy work that steal time from our day and contribute to an increasingly impersonal and bureaucratic system.

Is it any wonder that physician burnout continues to hover around fifty percent?

We continue to defend medical practice in our states through contentious battles over scope of practice, believing what our research clearly tells us—that patients want, deserve and simply do better when their medical care is directed by those with the most training: their doctors.

We continue to influence the design and function of health technology so that it enhances—it augments—what a physician can do.

We continue to educate others about the deepening health inequities and push for equity-centered policies that open doors to care for all who need it.

This is what it means to be a physician leader today in this dramatic moment for health care in our country.

What are we doing to create the kind of health system that meets the needs of our changing nation?

What are we doing to ensure that our country will always be a land of op-

portunity for people like my parents—people who came here for a better life, believing, one day, that their son or daughter could stand on a stage like this and carry this torch forward?

For so much of my career, my view of the patient experience and the needs of our health system have been sharpened by what I see in my practice and what I experience through the difficult work of organized medicine.

This perspective changed forever last November, at the AMA's Interim Meeting in Orlando. I was giving a rather routine talk to physicians and medical students at the Minority Affairs Section meeting when my speech became garbled and for a minute or two, I wasn't making any sense.

It was one of those moments when I was lucky to be in a room full of physicians that knew me well.

Although I didn't realize what was happening, colleagues in that room—some of whom are here tonight—worried that I might have suffered a stroke and urged me to get evaluated.

A few days later, an MRI revealed the kind of diagnosis that shakes a person to their core—an 8 cm temporal lobe cancer on the left side of my brain—one that likely had been growing for years.

A lot happens when you get diagnosed with a brain tumor.

There's a lot to process—not only for the person with the tumor but the loved ones in their life.

For me—a physician with a highly analytical mind who tries to keep his emotions in check—the question was simply: Okay, I've got a brain tumor. Now what?

I was fortunate that within a couple days of this MRI, I had half a dozen opinions from leading experts, and ultimately an appointment at Mayo Clinic with some of the world's best neurosurgeons and neuro-oncologists.

I had successful brain surgery last December—and I stand here tonight incredibly grateful but also changed by this experience.

No, not because my brain is smaller. I've changed because I have a better

understanding of our health care system. After 25 years as a practicing physician, I was at death's door as a patient.

As Nita and our sons will tell you, I have found a well of emotion inside me that I had long ago buried. Unfortunately for them, they now bear the brunt of it.

I speak to others about my experience as often as I can—to medical students and residents, to reporters, to fellow physicians and to fellow brain tumor patients.

I even started a file on my computer that I simply call “tumor wisdom” and in it I reflect on how fortunate I am, what insights I have gained about medicine, and what our patients need from us.

Some of these musings are quite personal, like the note that talks about how impatient and intolerant I can be with patients who have psychological needs on top of their physical needs.

I know this to be a character flaw, not in my patients, but in me—and I'm working on it.

Other notes relate to religion and the power of prayer and worship, beliefs that are important to my parents and millions of others, but, until now, had never been of great significance to me.

I now pledge myself to approach such things with open mindedness and not the cynicism from before.

But the very first note I wrote when reflecting on my cancer was this: If I lived just one mile away in almost any direction in Flint, if I didn't have the connections that come with being a prominent physician and now, president of the AMA, I would still be waiting for that MRI scan instead of healing at home.

And the outcome could have been much, much different.

There are tremendous gaps in our health care system that require our attention.

And it all starts with timely access to care.

That's why continuing to fight for adequate health coverage for our patients is so important.

Why fighting to repair and rebuild our physician workforce is so important.

Why fighting to spend more money on our patients and less on health care bureaucracy is so important.

Why fighting to remove the barriers to care that impact so many people is so important.

And why fighting for a sustainable, equitable health care model is so important.

This is the work of the AMA.

And it's the work that will sustain me throughout my presidency and however many years I have left to serve my community—and my profession.

One other note of “tumor wisdom” that I wrote down says: “Don't wait to show affection to people until a moment like this.”

And so, I stand here tonight with immense gratitude, not just for the support that I have received in the last few months, but for the support from

loved ones and friends throughout my career and on my journey to becoming AMA president.

Thank you to my Michigan State Medical Society & Great Lakes State Coalition, their delegations here, and my advisors within. My home.

Thank you to my fellow otolaryngologists and our academy's delegation here. My home away from home.

Thank you to all of the people here tonight from Flint, including my office staff, for your patience and tireless support.

Thank you to my inner circle of friends and advisers within this House for helping me be a better leader.

Thank you to my fellow board members and those that preceded them for teaching me how to lead.

Thank you to the generation of leaders before me for paving the way—and for all that you have done to shape this organization.

And of course, thank you to my in-laws, my parents, my wife Nita, and my sons Nikhil and Deven—for absolutely everything.

There is no doubt that our nation and our profession face many challenges right now. And in moments like this it would be easy to fall into hopelessness and apathy.

But this is where we must find the motivation to drive us forward—to push the work of this organization forward.

I believe that physicians are built for moments like this.

We are problem-solvers.

We are advocates.

We are resilient.

And we are determined.

We must speak with one voice to demand a better future for our patients and our profession.

This is where we rise.

Thank you so much.

WINNER: MOTIVATIONAL SPEECH

“Beware of Her”

Written and delivered by Kyle Murtagh,
Presentation Skills Trainer, Confidence By Design



Delivered in Edinburgh, Scotland, Oct. 20, 2025

Beware
of
Her
Just to be clear,
This is not a speech about my wife.
It's about the influence
a story
can have on you.
You see,
a story can scare you.
A story can anger you.
A story can even make you
cruel.
Don't believe me?
Well listen to this story
about the Wicked
Witch
Annie Palmer.
In the 1800s,
on the beautiful island of Jamaica

Annie Palmer
practised
dark
magic.
She lived in a huge mansion
called Rose Hall,
where she viciously murdered
3 innocent men.
While her first husband was sleeping
Yes you.
She poured boiling oil
into his ear
scalding his skull.
While her second husband was sleeping
she stabbed him
until
his
bed
turned
red.

While her third husband was sleeping,
by the way,
how did you feel safe enough to sleep?
she strangled him to death.
That's why she's known as
the Wicked Witch
of Rose Hall.
So gentlemen,
anyone wanna be Annie's 4th hus-
band?
Ladies,
anyone wanna offer their man?
Oh I see you're thinking about it.
To this day,
Annie's evil spirit
still haunts
those
halls.
So, last year,
when Emma and I went to Jamaica,

we thought it would be a good idea
 to go there!
 At night!
 We arrive at dusk.
 Our tour guide is waiting outside,
 a big bald guy.
 Looking at him
 is like looking into my future.
 As we approach,
 the first thing he says to me is OHH-
 HH, Boy,
 tonight you're gonna die!
 What?
 He says,
 Annie's favourite colour
 is red...
 I was wearing this!
 Then he says, You know,
 you're definitely Annie's type.
 At this point,
 I look at Emma for protection.
 She looks at the guide and says,
 Annie can have him.
 We follow him up a fire-lit path
 to Annie's Mansion.
 He unlocks the door,
 we enter the dark house
 and he lights up a candle.
 We go upstairs to the bedrooms.
 A door creeks open,
 revealing the bed,
 the husbands never left.
 Then as cold shivers rush through me,
 the guide says,
 We're going into Annie's bedroom.
 Beware of her.
 The door creeks open...
 I see a room with blood red walls
 A bed with ghost-like curtains
 And a big
 black

wardrobe.
 The guide says,
 Pssst,
 Come here!
 I approach the wardrobe.
 He says, look at what's engraved here
 It says,
 AHHHHHHHHH!
 I'm sorry
 An actress in a red dress
 jumps out SCREAMING!
 Now,
 I did NOT scream,
 I did NOT jump into Emma's arms.
 And I definitely did NOT
 cry.
 Emma and the guide might tell you
 different,
 But that doesn't matter.
 What matters is that we got out of that
 house alive!
 Once we got back to our hotel
 and shook off the fear of Annie Palmer,
 Emma said,
 Is her story true?
 So we looked her up,
 and things got seriously scary...
 Turns out,
 Annie Palmer
 had one husband,
 not three.
 And he died
 of natural causes.
 The whole thing was misinformation!
 Which made me feel like an idiot for
 crying!
 Yet, every local we met,
 believed the story was true.
 And that got me thinking,
 Every day,
 we hear stories.

On TV, online, from friends, from
 family.
 And these stories shape how we think,
 how we feel,
 and how we treat others.
 Still,
 how often do we share a story
 without knowing if it's true?
 It can be so cruel
 when an untrue story is shared,
 because it can grow and grow and
 GROW until you get
 Annie Palmer.
 A woman whose reputation was vi-
 ciously murdered
 by a story.
 Interestingly ,
 all historical accounts say,
 Annie
 murdered
 no one.
 Yet, she's known
 as the Wicked
 Witch.
 You know who the real wicked witch
 is?
 Misinformation.
 Beware of her.
 She can scare you.
 She can anger you.
 She can make you
 cruel.
 So when you hear a story,
 before you share it
 check it.
 Because what will defeat
 the REAL
 wicked
 witch
 is the TRUTH.

WINNER: STATE-OF-THE-INSTITUTION SPEECH

“Ever Forward, Evergreen”

By Mike Faulk for Jay Inslee,
Outgoing Governor, Washington State



Delivered as final State of the State speech,
Olympia, Washington, Jan. 14, 2025

Good morning. Thank you to Paul Benz for the invocation, as well as Lena Hou for her wonderful vocal talents. Astute observers may notice that Lena also sang the national anthem at our first inauguration 12 years ago when she was just 9 years old.

Lena, I've also aged just a little since then.

Mr. President, Madam Speaker, Mr. Chief Justice, distinguished justices of the court, members of the Legislature, Tribal leaders, local electeds, members of the Consular Corps, invited guests, and my fellow Washingtonians...

I come to you with pride and gratitude for our state.

It was my life's honor to be elected governor three times, to work for the people of Washington these 12 years. This is a place that means everything to me and Trudi.

Speaking of Trudi Inslee, I want to thank her and our family and give a special thanks to our grandchildren: Nolan, Brooks, Annie, Chase, Zoe, and Brody.

I also would like to share my deep appreciation for the 65,000 state employees who have dedicated their work to making life better for all Washingtonians.

We'll miss the work and the relationships. But I'm not here to talk about the end of something. A new legislative session means we should talk about beginnings.

It was 35 years ago this week when I took my first oath of office as a legislator from the Yakima Valley. I took that oath in this building alongside many new faces.

My colleagues and I had great conviction, tremendous zeal, and full heads of hair. We were a new genera-

tion of legislators who sought to upend the status quo.

Today I notice the new faces around Olympia. I see fresh visions for where we want to take our state, leaders who want to make these dreams for Washington reality as fast as possible.

My freshman class quickly saw that change often takes patience and resilience. We learned the lesson that progress takes time and perseverance.

But think about both the progress we've made and the time and efforts it took to make it.

We used to be a state that didn't fund early childcare until a champion named Representative June Leonard started moving the needle. We didn't have outdoor heat protections for farmworkers. We didn't have paid family leave, a public health option, or a strategy for youth homelessness. Washingtonians didn't have marriage equality, but brave visionaries like Senator Cal Anderson weren't quiet about this injustice.

Thanks to years of work by undaunted individuals who showed up session after session, it was eventual—and inexorable—that all of those things came to pass.

Since my terms in the Legislature, I've represented congressional districts on both sides of the Cascades. I've held three terms as governor. And in this moment, I see an Evergreen state going ever forward.

To the new leaders here today I say: You will inevitably face frustration. You will struggle with the tyranny of the status quo. Do not lose patience. Do not trade in courage for comfort. Never forget that Martin Luther King Jr. said the moral arc of the universe bends slowly but steadily toward justice.

Even as governor, it took years to pass cap-and-invest, a capital gains tax, an assault weapons ban, and the nation's most generous college financial aid program.

We kept working year in, year out. Eventually, we hit tremendous milestones in our state's history.

Together, we complied with the McCleary ruling for funding schools. It took years, but with heroic effort we got it done.

Together, we met the rapidly growing behavioral health demands highlighted by the Trueblood ruling.

Together we reduced youth homelessness by 40 percent.

Together we created the nation's best paid family leave, which has received over 1 million applications.

Together we passed the two biggest transportation funding packages in state history, putting thousands of people to work and broadening our focus beyond highways to include things like free transit for all Washingtonians 18 and younger.

There's more work to do, of course, but these accomplishments should give us confidence for the next steps. We keep moving forward. We pull together. Because we're the state of Washington.

We came together through setback and calamity. We did it during the Skagit River bridge collapse. We did it through multiple historic wildfire seasons. The people of Oso did it when the nation's worst landslide in history struck.

We rallied to welcome those fleeing war in places like Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, because Washington's values make us a place of refuge and opportunity in an unstable world.

And we inspired a nation with how we cared for each other during COVID. If the rest of the country had adopted

our approach to the pandemic, close to half a million lives would have been saved across America.

The secret to our success is we don't leave anybody behind. We follow the science. And we work together to make extremely difficult decisions.

Protecting that progress will be challenging this session. This budget situation is both one we've seen before and something entirely unique.

The Great Recession triggered major reductions in spending and services—\$11 billion in cuts, about the same amount of the budget gap we face today.

Today, our economy is not in decline. Unlike during the Great Recession, our economy is doing as well as it ever has—but that prosperity hasn't bloomed equally.

While fortunes for some are growing, so are lines at our food banks. Our economy provides more than enough to some, but our regressive tax system is unfair to most working families and jeopardizes our continued progress on the systems that Washingtonians depend upon.

For those who weren't here during the Great Recession, this is what \$11 billion in cuts looked like:

Suspending efforts to reduce class sizes and increase teacher pay.

Taking state health care away from 40,000 low-income Washingtonians.

Cutting higher education funding, causing tuition to soar.

Slashing mental health services at our state hospitals.

And reducing safety net programs for people with disabilities, the elderly and those living with poverty.

It's fitting to look at this budget differently.

Abstract numerical cuts mean concrete personal pain, like the pain of a kid who has to drop out of college because they can't afford a tuition hike. Like the pain of the mother who is told there's no room at the hospital for her child in the midst of a schizophrenic episode.

It took years to build back what we lost in that era. My budget in December

proposed \$2 billion in budget cuts, but pruning significantly more than that I would consider a slide back to those dark days.

We have a strong economy, so why would we consider cuts to programs like housing or mental and behavioral health services at a time like this? Not when we're finally seeing progress. Not when the number of people needing these services is increasing. Not when these programs are saving lives and making our communities safer and healthier.

Washington voters just sent a strong message that they want to continue the path we're building.

In 12 years, we have built a strong engine of increasing justice and increasing health for our residents. We can't knock it off the tracks just as we've started rolling forward.

More than 55 percent of voters said they want to keep their long-term care. Washingtonians believe in our work on health care and human services. We should not consider anything that diminishes Washington's ambitions in this arena.

More than 64 percent of our state said we're keeping our capital gains tax on extraordinary profits. My budget honors that by asking those who have benefitted the most from Washington's booming economy to play more of a role protecting behavioral health, early learning and education.

Deep budget cuts always fall hardest on the people who can't afford them, like working families, or students trying to manage both their grades and their mental health, or the thousands who have been priced out by a housing market that has not kept pace with demand.

Here's one thing I know: There are influential people and organizations that have your phone numbers, who are going to work those contacts hard this session.

Whether the influential voices have you feted over lunch or cornered out in those halls, before you take that vote, I hope you think about the voiceless—the Washingtonians who don't have

your cell numbers—and remember why you're here.

We have to protect what they value the most too, especially when it comes to our youth and our families.

We have to go forward on our investments in young people and education, like the work we've done to grow more support resources at our schools with social workers, paraeducators, and counselors.

Robert Daniel is a counselor at Discovery Middle School in Federal Way. He's here today. They used to have one counselor serving more than 700 students' emotional, academic and social needs. Now places like Discovery Middle School have enough counselors meeting the recommended ratio to provide more robust, one-on-one counseling to the students who need it most.

Counselors like Robert don't just react when students are in crisis, they're proactively involved in bringing out each student's own strengths. They have more capacity do that now thanks to this Legislature, but they still need your continued support.

Thank you, Robert, for being here.

This Legislature has a clear mandate to continue its progress in other areas, including climate. Washingtonians have your back. Sixty-two percent of voters chose to keep slashing pollution and strengthening our communities through cap-and-invest.

On the news the other day in Los Angeles, there was a woman fleeing the fires, who turned around to go save her neighbor's house. They asked her why and she said, "I just could not sit there and do nothing."

And I thought of my state. And how we are doing something. We're building a clean energy economy that's the envy of the nation.

There's a nearly 100 percent consensus in the scientific community that climate change is happening and that it is human-caused. That's why I'm so heartened that we have acted.

Since we passed the Climate Commitment Act, the problem statement has grown, with increasing fires and heat domes; increasing rainstorms

and flooding; increasing acidification of Puget Sound, loss of ice caps. The need for the programs funded by CCA will only continue to increase.

It's called the Climate Commitment Act for a reason. We ought to honor that commitment.

We shouldn't debilitate or steal from that central premise of why voters supported it.

We're joined today by Vanessa Kooosh from Queets. Vanessa works at the Quinault Tribe's Generations building supporting the community's culture through history and language programs.

Community resources like these are threatened because the land it's on is at risk to sea level rise caused by climate change.

They're not the only coastal community living with this threat. The Climate Commitment Act is supporting them by charging polluters and investing in these communities' relocation to higher ground.

Thanks to the Climate Commitment Act, and the choice by lawmakers to honor its purpose, the people of Queets are getting a new Generations building on higher ground, safe from flooding, funded by cap-and-invest.

This is just one example of one way the CCA is keeping communities safer and healthier. Vanessa, we wish you well.

We have work ahead with a new federal administration as well.

Look: Our state will work with anyone on policies that are positive for Washington. But we will not bend the knee to a would-be authoritarian's worst impulses.

We will follow the Constitution. And we will be steadfast in our commitment to the progress of our state together. Bob Ferguson, a guy who knows about defending Washingtonians, will become Washington's 24th governor tomorrow at noon.

In November, Washington voters saw two different visions for the future of our state, and they chose to continue the path of progress.

Congratulations, Bob. Good luck.

I'm leaving state government, but my feet remain planted firmly in the fight for Washington's future.

Although my administration's time is at an end, we've been running full speed "through the tape" and now we are passing the baton. This Legislature knows how to keep going. The challenges ahead will not weaken the momentum of what we are doing here.

Washington state is a light to the world. We're a beacon of progress by so many measures. Because we follow the science. We work together. We refuse to leave our neighbors behind.

When the law said the state could put someone to death, we refused to accept an imperfect system. We ended the death penalty.

When the U.S. Supreme Court stole the right of choice, we stood up for reproductive health everywhere by welcoming patients and doctors to Washington.

When working families needed relief, we passed the Working Families Tax Credit, energy rebates, a public health option, and free transit for everyone 18 and younger.

When we saw LGBTQ youth being abused and manipulated by conversion therapy, we banned it. When we saw our state still had racist housing covenants, we struck those down too.

And as gun deaths rose nationwide, we held the firearms industry accountable and passed some of the strongest reforms in America.

This Legislature has a lot of hard work ahead. You have the grit and the vision to keep the pace of progress. I know this about you. It's why I'm grateful to have worked with all of you.

I woke up every morning these last 12 years asking how I could help Washingtonians realize their dreams. And every morning I was filled with confidence in the genius, the compassion and the grand ambitions of our great state of Washington.

Tomorrow morning, I know you all will wake up with the same sense of confidence, optimism, and hope.

To Washington, I bid you fair winds and following seas.

Thank you.

WINNER: TED TALK/TEDX TALK

"The Art of Being Persuaded"

Written and delivered by Jens Kjeldsen



Delivered in Øygaarden, Straume,
Hordaland, Norway, Oct. 24, 2025

A few years ago, a friend of mine, Sarah, got good news.

Her mother had found a partner: Frank.

The mother lost her husband a year before so, she was happy to find a new soulmate.

Frank was handsome, ten years below her, and rather well of.

He was perfect.

He shared the mother's interests.

He was a good listener, attentive, and caring.

He showered her with love and compliments.

But Frank wasn't perfect.

Sarah sensed that something was wrong.

Her mother had only met Frank online.

Frank was a fiction, created by on-line scammers.

Sarah told her mother that Frank was not real.

But the mother refused to believe it.

Sarah tried to persuade her mother.

But her mother argued back.

Sarah couldn't convince her mother.

She assumed her mother would end up with a bit of love grief and lose some money.

What happened, was much worse.

Her mother lost her savings.

She felt humiliated after being manipulated

She was deeply ashamed for ignoring Sarah's warnings.

The shame made her to take her own life.

If she had let her family persuade her, she would have been alive today.

The story of Sarah's mother is uncommon, but the way she reacted to the attempts to persuade her is very common:

She would not listen.

We all do this.

—

We do not listen when people try to persuade us.

If we have taken a position, we will defend it.

If we hear arguments for another position, we come up with counter arguments.

Of course we do.

Because we defend what we believe in.

But being stuck in defending, makes us unable to see that there are always two sides to every issue.

Being stuck in defending prevents us from becoming wiser.

Today, I will try to persuade you to let yourself be persuaded.

Oh yes, I do see the irony.

And I know that it feels like a trick:

I tell you that it is a good thing to be persuaded, so that I can persuade you that you should be persuaded.

Clever, indeed.

But hear me out.

—

In 1890 the Norwegian parliament discussed women's suffrage.

Parliament member and bishop Johan Heuch was strongly against giving women the right to vote.

A woman talking politics, he believed, was an abomination.

Not everyone was as harsh, but the parliament rejected the right of women to vote.

Heuch remained critical of women's participation in politics.

But he also changed his mind.

He accepted that women should be allowed to vote.

So, did many other people, and in 1913 the Norwegian parliament granted women suffrage.

If no one had changed their minds, women would not have had the right to vote.

Half of you in this room today, would not be allowed into the voting booth.

Changing the minds of others' matters.

Changing our own mind matters even more.

Because, if no one is willing to be persuaded, nothing will change.

—

I have studied rhetoric for three decades.

I have taught students in high school and at university, I have coached teachers, politicians, and CEOs.

They all want to learn how to persuade.

And yes, rhetoric is the art of persuasion.

But the main lesson I teach people is not to talk, it is to listen.

If you do not listen to your audience, if you do not try to see the world as they do, then you will not be able to persuade them.

But more importantly, you will miss your chance of being persuaded yourself.

You will miss your chance of becoming wiser.

This law of listening before you talk, goes back to the ancient beginnings of rhetoric.

The philosopher Aristotle defined rhetoric as the art of finding in every issue the available means of persuasion.

Think about that:

the art of finding in every issue the available means of persuasion.

Aristotle is not saying that you should persuade.

He is saying that you should examine the issue at hand, and see what might be persuasive.

This is a kind of listening, because you are looking at the issue to see what it tells you.

You can have good reasons to believe what you do, while others can have equally good reasons to believe what they do.

You can both be right at the same time.

Take my wife and me.

We went to buy a couch.

I spotted a very comfortable couch

My wife saw the couch and immediately exclaimed:

“This couch is ugly”.

And, OK, it was rather ugly.

She was right, but I was also right.

The couch was both comfortable and ugly.

My wife persuaded me that we should not buy the couch.

Today I am happy that I was persuaded, because unless I was sitting in the couch I would be looking at it, confronted with how ugly it was.

Two voices in disagreement, two opposite viewpoints, yet both were true.

In ancient Greek rhetoric this is called *dissoi logoi*, which literally means opposing voices—voices in opposition.

To me, this is the most fundamental insight in rhetoric.

There are always two sides to every issue.

They may be in conflict, but still, they can both be true.

Rhetoric helps us to make the weaker argument stronger, so that we may explore both sides of every issue.

You may be right, but so may the other person.

And you may both be right at the same time.

This is why you should be open to persuasion.

You are probably thinking:

“Yeah, the other person may be right, but I am more right.”

Really?

How do you know that you are more right?

Bishop Heuch also thought he was more right, and so did Sarah’s mother, when Sarah tried to persuade her.

And my wife thought so as well; but of course, she is almost always more right.

Think about the last time you had a discussion.

What did you do as the other person put forward arguments?

If you are like most people, you were already creating counter arguments.

It is like a game we play.

When we discuss, we doubt what the other person says.

Let’s call it the doubting game.

In the doubting game, we seek errors.

We challenge the assumptions of others and find holes in their positions.

We question their claims, and look for flaws, contradictions, and weaknesses in their arguments.

This is a kind of critical thinking, which is good.

But not always.

Because the doubting game creates division, and prevents us from seeing the other side.

Sarah’s mother played the doubting game, when her family argued she was the victim of a scam.

Instead, she should have played the believing game.

When you play the believing game, you try to understand the perspective of the other.

You try to find coherence in the arguments you are offered.

In the believing game, you imagine that you believe the view of the other.

It is a game, so you do not have to actually believe the view.

But imagining allows you to see the other side.

You can make sense of it.

The believing game will not always change our minds—nor should it.

But it opens the possibility of moving toward a new position.

This is the art of being persuaded:

Being open and willing to change if the other side makes sense.

You might think: well, the problem for Sarah’s mother was that she played the believing game when she shouldn’t have.

She believed the scammer when she should have doubted him.

And you are right.

But so am I.

Sarah’s mother played the believing game, when she shouldn’t have.

But she also played the doubting game, when she shouldn’t have.

Unfortunately, we play the doubting game, when we hear something that we disagree with or challenges us, because we do not want to change.

And unfortunately, we play the believing game when we hear something, that we agree with or that accommodates us, because we do not want to change.

Psychologists call this confirmation bias:

We are eager to confirm what we already believe.

We ought to do it the other way around.

We should play the doubting game when we hear something that we agree with, and we should play the believing game, when we hear something that we disagree with.

That helps us see both sides of the issue.

It will make us wiser, and I think, happier.

Take the former CEO of Apple, Steve Jobs.

In 2007 he presented a device that changed the world: The iPhone.

Jobs stood on a huge stage in front of thousands of people.

He paused to savor the moment and then said:

“This is a day I have been looking forward to for two and a half years”.

When he presented the iPhone, the room erupted in ecstatic applause.

Nothing has earned Apple as much money, dedication, and brand appeal as the iPhone.

But Jobs never wanted to make a phone.

He hated the idea of making a phone.

When his engineers proposed to turn the famous iPod into a phone,

Steve Jobs said: “That is the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard”

He played the doubting game.

But the engineers argued well, and finally, Jobs started to play the believing game.

Apple became one of the most successful companies in the world because Jobs turned away from the doubting game and entered the believing game.

You should do the same.

You should be open to persuasion. It can change your relationships, it can help your work life, and yes, it can change the world.

Not in an instant, but little by little, person by person.

In your relationships, winning an argument, may mean losing the relation; but listening might get you a good-looking couch and a happy spouse.

In your work life, rejecting your colleagues’ proposals, can destroy the team’s creativity.

Letting them persuade you, might get you a winning business idea.

In politics playing the doubting game, will create division, and stop us from improving our society.

Playing the believing game, will foster understanding, union, and progress.

Remember: The art of being persuaded is not letting everybody persuade you.

It is the art of listening and opening yourself to the possibility of being persuaded.

Letting ourselves be open to persuasion is our antidote to polarization, it is our vaccination against fundamentalism, it is our united way forward.

You might think now: yeah, that’s a really good idea:

Other people should listen more and change their minds.

No.

This only works if we all do it. And it starts with you.

So, please, open yourself to persuasion.

Letting yourself be persuaded doesn’t make you weaker.

It makes you stronger. It makes you wise.

And if we all open up to persuasion, then, maybe, just maybe, we can also make the world a little less divided.