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Remarks at the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award Ceremony

November 23, 2009

Thank you. Please, everybody have a seat. Everybody have a seat. What a wonderful evening. Before I begin, let me just acknowledge some folks here in the crowd. First of all, Mrs. Kerry Kennedy, for the great work that she's doing day in, day out, Mr. Philip Johnston, thank you to both of you for helping to organize this tonight. Obviously, I've got to say thanks to my favorite people, Mrs. Robert F. Kennedy, also known as Ethel Kennedy. To Representative Donald Payne, Representative Gregory Meeks, and Representative Edward Markey, who are all here, thank you for your attendance and your support of this important award.

You know, every year for 24 years, starting the year this award was established, my friend, Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy, spoke at this event. And I'm told that he looked forward to it all year, that he relished the chance to shine a bright light on an injustice and on those fighting it and to support them in that fight. He also enjoyed a family reunion. He relished the chance to pay tribute to those carrying on the unfinished work of his brother's life, work that for nearly half a century in the U.S. Senate he made his own.

And he was pleased that this award honored men and women across the globe doing a wide range of urgent work: fighting to end apartheid, advance democracy, empower minorities and indigenous peoples, promote free speech and elections, and more. Because Ted understood that Bobby's legacy wasn't a devotion to one particular cause or a faith in a certain ideology, but rather, it was a sensibility. A belief that in this world there is right and there is wrong, and it is our job to build our laws and our lives around recognizing the difference.

A sensitivity to injustice so acute that it can't be relieved by the rationalizations that make life comfortable for the rest of us, that others' suffering is not our problem, that the ills of the world are somehow not our concern, a moral orientation that renders certain people constitutionally incapable of remaining a bystander in the face of evil, a sensibility that recognizes the power of all people, however humble their circumstances, to change the course of history, those are the traits of Bobby Kennedy that this award recognizes and the very traits that define the character and guide the life of this year's recipient.

And while we feel a certain sadness that Senator Kennedy is not with us to honor her, let us also take pleasure tonight in knowing just how much he would have loved and admired Magodonga Mahlangu and the organization that she helps lead, WOZA, which stands for Women of Zimbabwe Arise, and is represented tonight by one of its founders, Jenni Williams.

Now, as a young girl raised in Matabeleland—in the Matabeleland region of Zimbabwe in the early 1980s, Magodonga witnessed the—and I've got to make sure I get this right—Gukurahundi massacres, a systematic murder of many thousands of people, including her uncle and several cousins, many of whom were buried in mass graves that they'd been forced to dig themselves.

And she witnessed the fearful silence that followed, as talking about these events was forbidden. Magodonga found this to be intolerable. She wanted to speak out; she wanted people to know the truth about what was happening in her country.

So it was a revelation when, years later, she discovered a group called WOZA whose mission is the very opposite of silence. WOZA was started back in 2003 to empower women to speak out about the issues affecting their families and their country: desperate hunger, crumbling health and education systems, domestic violence and rape, and government repression ranging from restrictions on free expression to abduction and murder of dissidents.

WOZA's guiding principle is tough love, the idea that political leaders in Zimbabwe could use a little discipline. And who better to provide that than the nation's mothers? And since its founding, the organization has grown from a handful of activists to a movement of 75,000 strong. There's even a men's branch, I understand, MOZA. And over the past 7 years, they have conducted more than a hundred protests, maids and hairdressers, vegetable sellers and seamstresses, taking to the streets singing and dancing, banging on pots empty of food and brandishing brooms to express their wish to sweep the government clean.

They often don't get far before being confronted by President Mugabe's riot police. They have been gassed, abducted, threatened with guns, and badly beaten, forced to count out loud as each blow was administered. Three thousand WOZA members have spent time in custody or in prison, sometimes dragged with their babies into cells. Magodonga and Jenni are due back in court on December 7th, charged with conduct likely to cause a breach of peace. They face a 5 year sentence if convicted.

That so many women have decided to risk and endure so much is in many ways a testament to the extraordinary example of tonight's honoree. Each time they see Magodonga beaten back—beaten black and blue during one protest, only to get right back up and lead another, singing freedom songs at the top of her lungs in full view of security forces, the threat of a policeman's baton loses some of its power.

Each time her house is searched or her life is threatened or she's once again arrested—more than 30 times so far—she continues to stand in public and inspire the people of Zimbabwe, the power of the state then seems a little less absolute. Each time she's emerged from incarceration after enduring deplorable conditions, brutal abuse and gone right back to work, the prospect of prison loses some of its capacity to deter.

And by her example, Magodonga has shown the women of WOZA and the people of Zimbabwe that they can undermine their oppressors' power with their own power, that they can sap a dictator's strength with their own. Her courage has inspired others to summon theirs. And the organization's name, WOZA, which means "come forward," has become its impact even—its impact has been even more as people know of the violence that they face, and more people have come forward to join them.

More people have come to realize what Magodonga and the women of WOZA have known all along: That the only real way to teach love and nonviolence is by example. Even when that means sitting down while being arrested, both as a sign that they refuse to retaliate, absorbing each blow without striking back, and a warning that, come what may, they're not going anywhere.

They even manage to show love to those who imprison them. As Jenni put it, "Many a time we've in effect conducted a workshop for our jailers, acting out the role of a mother and teaching how the country can be rebuilt if we have love in our hearts."

When asked how they can endure so much violence and what keeps them going in the face of such overwhelming odds, the women of WOZA reply, simply, each other. And that may be Magodonga's greatest achievement: That she has given the women of Zimbabwe each other;

that she has given people who long for peace and justice each other; that she has given them a voice they can only have collectively and a strength that they can only have together.

They are a force to be reckoned with. Because history tells us, truth has a life of its own once it's told. Love can transform a nation once it's taught. Courage can be contagious, righteousness can spread, and there is much wisdom in the old proverb that God could not be everywhere, so he created mothers.

In the end, history has a clear direction, and it is not the way of those who arrest women and babies for singing in the streets. It's not the way of those who starve and silence their own people and cling to power by threat of force.

It is the way of the maid walking home in Montgomery, the young woman marching silently in the streets of Tehran, the leader imprisoned in her own home for her commitment to democracy. It is the way of young people in Cape Town who braved the wrath of their government to hear a young Senator from New York speak about the ripples of hope one righteous act can create. And it is the way that Magadonga Mahlangu and Jenni Williams and the women and men who take to the streets of Harare and Bulawayo, Victoria Falls, because they love their country and love their children and know that something better is possible.

Bobby Kennedy once said, "All great questions must be raised by great voices, and the greatest voice is the voice of the people—speaking out—in prose, or painting or poetry or music; speaking out—in homes and halls, streets and farms, courts and cafes—let that voice speak and the stillness you hear will be the gratitude of mankind."

Magodongo and WOZA have given so many of their fellow citizens of Zimbabwe that voice and tonight, we express our gratitude for their work. So it is now my pleasure to join with Mrs. Robert F. Kennedy to present the 2009 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award to Magodonga Mahlangu and WOZA.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:01 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Kerry Kennedy, daughter, former Senator Robert F. Kennedy; Philip W. Johnston, chair of the board, Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights; and President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe.

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