

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2021*

## **Eulogy at the Funeral of Former Governor Ruth Ann Minner of Delaware in Milford, Delaware**

*November 10, 2021*

Well, Tommy, you left it to me. [*Laughter*] We all brought our weapons. I brought my rosary. [*Laughter*] I've got a story about that with Ruth Ann.

Folks, to our beloved Delaware, to our beloved nation, and to our beloved family: Here in Milford, in this house of God, we find truth in the old proverb, "A good example is the best sermon." To me, that was Ruth Ann. "A good example is the best sermon."

Ruth Ann was, without engaging in hyperbole, one of the—Delaware's real, true pioneers, one of the most remarkable and inspirational people I got to meet. I didn't know her—I knew her extremely well, I thought, but not in the same way that the earlier speakers have known her, working with her every single day.

Ruth Ann and I, we'd talk when one of us were in trouble politically or one of—[*laughter*]—or one of us were seeking advice from the other person. I mean that sincerely.

And she was one of the most remarkable, inspirational people that Jill and I have met and that our family has ever known. And we've met a lot of people. We've met a lot of successful women at home and internationally. Ruth Ann had something different than almost everybody I've ever worked with.

Mr. Lindell—Lindale, I should say; Governor Carney; Governor Carper; the Right Reverend Blunt Rochester—[*laughter*]—that girl can preach; Governor Markell; and the Minner family: Look, in Delaware, we know the power of her example, and we know it pretty well. Every one of us in these pews had some interaction with Ruth Ann, beyond the family. But it's one that every American should know—her example. And I mean this sincerely.

Because of the generosity of the people of Delaware, I had an opportunity to meet virtually every serious, well-known person in the world that—because of the nature of my job. And I'd not often, but occasionally, talk about Ruth Ann when they'd ask me about, "Can you tell me about—can you define America for me?" Not a joke. And I'd talk about—it's just about opportunity. And it's about being able to dream something beyond your circumstance and have some shot being able to get there.

But it's not just learning that she was elected to the House of Delaware—it's not just learning about that—or that she went to the Delaware Senate, Lieutenant Governor, or as the first woman Governor. But it's how she got there, which I think, Nance, is what it's all about, how she did it.

It's how each time she climbed up the political ladder, she always stayed grounded in the lives of everyday people—whether it was the folks at the corner store, whether it was her neighbors, whether it was her family. Just ordinary people—that's what she and I—when we'd talk, we'd talk about.

I remember when I did the Inaugural. I said, "This is about just—never once, when we've given the American people a shot—just a shot—never one single time has the American people—ordinary people—ever, ever let us down."

[*At this point, a cell phone rang.*]

That's okay. That's—[*laughter*]. That's Ruth Ann saying, "Keep going, Joe." [*Laughter*]

But you know, the thing is, Ruth Ann had that—that "something special" my mom would talk about, in that she had a sense of empathy. She understood. She understood. When she looked at you and talked to you, especially if it was a crisis, you knew she understood.

You know, and the American people should know that she was a Governor who once, as a teenager, dropped out of school to—you all know it, but the American people should know it—dropped out of school to help run the family farm. It sounds like fairy-tale stuff, but it's real. It happened.

As a young widow who, after Frank suddenly passed away, decided that she's going to get her GED while working two jobs and raising three boys—easy to read, hard as the devil to do.

An entrepreneur who helped build a successful auto-towing company that the boys ran. A pathbreaker who—I remember this one, because I was doing the same thing with less efficiency as a member of the banking committee—which was when she went to get that loan and needed a signature of her husband. She and I talked about this. She needed—she couldn't get it because her husband needed to sign it.

And after going out to the elected officials and saying, "Can we do something about this?" she decided the best way was to change the law, was to write it herself. She determined to do it, and she did it. Not a lot of highfalutin speeches or anything, she just did it.

And you know, no wonder she was such a tireless champion of education in Delaware—for a better education for every Delawarean. Ruth Ann was a student at Del Tech, where after—before my wife, Jill, taught there for years and years. The reason Jill is not with me today is, she's teaching today, fulltime as a professor at Northern Virginia Community College.

Ruth Ann was a student there—Del Tech. Just as smart and as talented as anyone else that was there, but just looking for a chance to get ahead. Not asking for anything, just a shot. "Let me get a credential. Just give me a shot."

No wonder she was a tireless champion in protecting Delaware's public lands and waters. It sounds corny, but she was a farmer's daughter. She understood it. She understood the consequence.

One of the few times—I say to the Governors here—that she called me about working with Harkins from Iowa to make sure we put away a lot of land—one of the reasons why. And I called her when—we're going to lay aside more land for farmers—and they get paid for doing it—than any time in American history if my bills go through. That's Ruth Ann. It's about the next generation, not just this one. She never talked about it that way. She just talked about it like this was the right thing to do.

You know, having watched Roger pass from cancer caused her to lead the effort to create the Delaware Cancer Consortium to increase screening, lower incidence rates of cancer, help end—as Jill and I talk about—ending cancer as we know it. When Jill started the breast cancer initiative—things have changed a long time ago—and Ruth Ann was one of the first people to call her.

Tommy, when I raised breast health—cancer—and breast health and cancer initiatives in the United States Senate, Bob Byrd showed me, under the Senate rules, I wasn't able to use the word "breast" on the floor the United States Senate. Not a joke. Not a joke. How much has changed because of Ruth Ann, because of the tireless, incredibly large number of mostly women that she encouraged?

You know, it's no wonder she was so unwavering on questions of principle, because that's what drove her. And as was stated by the Gov, Ruth Ann understood the—an elected office is about what you're willing to lose over, not what you're willing to do when you win.

When I got elected as a 29-year-old kid to the Senate—beating Caleb Boggs, a really fine man who endorsed me when I ran the second time—the thing I—people would come up to me and say, "Well, what's the secret?" Because if I won—this kid—this Irish Catholic kid from Claymont, Delaware, who didn't have the proverbial pot—how could this happen? There had to be a secret. They'd literally ask me, "What's the secret?"

The secret is represented by the women and men who have spoken already. "What are you willing to lose over?" If you haven't figured that out, you should never run for office. Go into another enterprise. You'd make a lot more money, and you get a lot less heat. *[Laughter]* No, I'm serious. What difference does it make if you're not doing what you believe?

So, you know—and I, like all of you, remember when she decided that protecting the health of Delawareans from cigarette smoke at a time when opponents would chant, "Ban Ruth Ann." Remember that? "Ban Ruth Ann. Ban Ruth Ann." Remember what she'd say? I remember. She would say, "Why should the life and health of a restaurant worker be valued less than anybody else's?" Because I believe that's how she thought about it.

What made her so powerful: She expressed what she really thought and felt. Didn't have to be clothed—cloaked in poetic language, just what she thought. Everybody understood what she meant. She worried about that waitress who was making 5 bucks an hour, busting her neck, breathing in that smoke. That's who she cared about, and people knew it.

You know, like many people here, I can honestly say that, but for the love of my family and the grace of God, I wouldn't be here today without Ruth Ann's support. She was always there for me, for us, for my beloved Beau. I think she cared about him, guys. I think she really cared about him.

Beau was elected attorney general when Ruth Ann was Governor. And the thing that surprised her most was she was ready to appoint him attorney general—*[laughter]*—and he wouldn't do it. He had too much of Ruth Ann in him. *[Laughter]*

But no kidding. You remember that? He wouldn't do it. He said, "I'm going to run for it." He couldn't have asked for a better angel to have on his shoulder than Ruth Ann. He respected her, he looked up to her, and I think she respected him. Like Ruth Ann, Beau walked among the people. When we lost him, Ruth Ann understood.

The Minner family knows how, when you have serious loss, people go up and say, "I know how you feel." And you know they mean well. But after a while, especially if you're well known, you feel like saying, "You have no damn idea how I feel." You know they mean well.

When someone comes up, like Ruth Ann, who's has lost two husbands, lost a son, and said, "Joe, I know how you feel," you know she knows. And just seeing her continue to walk, continue to speak out, continue to embrace the family that's left, you think to yourself, "Maybe I can do that."

Many of you have had significant loss. You know, when it happens, you feel like there's a black hole in your chest, you're being sucked into it. But there's certain people who come along; just by talking to you, they kind of reach down and keep you from sinking. Ruth Ann was one of those people that helped a lot, particularly for Jill.

You know, to America, let her be remembered as a leader who understood that democracy was a lot more than a form of government. Democracy is a way of being. It begins and grows in an open heart and with a willingness to come together by searching to find a common cause—not always the same exact answer, but a common cause. If you get to that point, there's nothing we can't solve if you acknowledge the common cause. And your grandmom and your great-grandmom knew how to do that. She reached out.

And you know, empathy is the fuel of democracy. I've learned, over time, it's the single most—how can I—underappreciated aspect of what makes governments work when they work. It's that sense of empathy, that thing that just says—you have a leader who says, "That person knows what I'm going through."

I was being reminded by my son Hunter, when I was trying to get the COP26—what's going on over in Europe on the environment—together, it makes a lot of difference. All empathy is looking at you and understanding what you're worried about. And you know and I know what you're worried about.

You know, one of my favorite quotes—I used to stutter badly when I was a kid. And I had a book of Emerson's—Ralph Waldo Emerson's saying on my—on the bureau with—I shared in a three-bedroom, split-level house—it was a decent place—with my two brothers—three brothers and—two brothers and I, and then a third brother came along.

But I used to get up in the middle of the night, and I'd—when everybody was asleep—and get a flashlight out. And I'd try to learn how to speak without—without—just—without making a fool of myself. And I'd shine it on the bottom of the mirror in this room we had where the four of us slept. And what would happen is that I'd try to keep my face from getting contorted when a stutter—go, go—and you just feel foolish.

And one of the things that I remember is—one of Emerson's quotes was, "Society is [like] a wave. The wave moves" on, but the particles remain the same. Meaning, God ain't made a new brand of man or woman in millennia or a lot longer.

And Ruth Ann kind of understood that. Whether she'd say it that way or not, I don't know. She understood that human beings are human beings. And you know—and she understood, I think, what a lot of us forget and, as President of the United States of America, I try to remind myself almost every day: Government is about making sure the system works—it functions, it works for people, you can deliver something to them.

Ruth Ann's love for the people of Delaware was really extraordinary, and we loved her back here in Delaware. She knew that while we have never made real the full promise of America for all Americans, every single generation has just kicked the clock up just a little bit closer. We've made slow, but consistent progress, opened a little wider.

And it's like the phrase used that she was more progressive than everybody thought, even though she would never think of herself as progressive. But the progressive part is: Society is like a wave. The wave moves on. The particles, the people don't change.

You know, the mission she now leaves us as a way forward is that's the power of Ruth Ann's example. If all of America—this is—if I were back teaching, I'd teach a course in Ruth Ann Minner. [*Laughter*] Seriously. Think about it. Think of what she did. A bright woman from humble circumstances. No fanfare. Not a whole lot of hollering and shouting. Just got up every morning and put one foot in front of the other.

Tommy knows—knew my dad. My dad would say just one thing: "If you get knocked down, get up. Just get up. Get up." His other expression was, "Never complain and never explain."

Well, you know, from our history, there's hope for the future—from solace, to strength. From our hearts, we continue to work for democracy. This was Ruth Ann's and my view—how she viewed things. Work of our time—of all time—and the life of Ruth Ann Minner: "Just keep moving forward. Don't stop. Don't quit."

To all of you who have worked alongside her, I want to thank you for your service and carrying on her legacy. And to her family—to Frank and Margaret, and Wayne and Phyllis, and

Cindy and in Gary's memory, and to all of the grandchildren and children: The Bible teaches, as was referenced earlier, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."

While comfort can be a long time in coming, if you have faith, I promise you—and hold onto one another—it will come, and it will give you a purpose in Ruth Ann's memory. For real.

There's an anthem that means a lot to the Bidens that I quoted in my Inaugural Address—and, I might add, on election night, when it was unusual, because we didn't get to have one of those big events, et cetera—it was down at the Riverfront—I walked out on that stage to accept the win. And who was the first person I saw—[laughter]—in an automobile in front of me, standing on a car? Ruth Ann Minner.

Just like when I decided to run for the Senate. I came down—well, I was told—in 1972, this kid from Delaware had been a public defender, a civil rights guy. And I was coming down to Milford. I thought, "I'm in hostile territory, man." [Laughter]

My politics wasn't what everybody expected. But your mom greeted me. Your mom went out and talked about me. Your mom brought the family and her friends together. That's when I figured out: All I need in Milford is Ruth Ann. [Laughter]

But you know, this anthem is one that I don't think she knew, but one that is—means a lot in my family that I used in my Inaugural Address for being sworn in as President. It goes like this. It's called the "American Anthem." It says:

The work and prayers of centuries have brought us to this day.

What shall our legacy be? What will our children say?

Let me know in my heart that when my days are through

America, America, I did my best for you.

Ruth Ann gave her best to Delaware. She gave her best to America. May God bless you, dear friend. May God bless America and Ruth Ann Minner.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:45 p.m. at the Milford Church of the Nazarene. In his remarks, he referred to Sen. Thomas R. Carper; Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester; former Gov. Jack A. Markell of Delaware; Frank and Wayne Ingram, sons, and Margaret, Phyllis, and Cindy Ingram, daughters-in-law, of former Gov. Minner; and former Sen. Tomas R. Harkin. He also referred to his brothers Francis and James.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Minner, Ruth Ann, former Governor of Delaware, eulogy at funeral in Milford, DE.

*Locations:* Milford, DE.

*Names:* Biden, Francis W.; Biden, James B.; Biden, Jill T.; Carney, John C., Jr.; Carper, Thomas R.; Harkin, Thomas R.; Ingram, Cindy; Ingram, Frank, Jr.; Ingram, Margaret; Ingram, Phyllis; Ingram, Wayne; Lindale, Richard; Markell, Jack A.; Minner, Ruth Ann; Rochester, Lisa Blunt.

*Subjects:* Civil rights : Women's rights and gender equality; Deaths : Minner, Ruth Ann, former Governor of Delaware; Delaware : Former Governor, death; Delaware : Governor; Delaware : President's visits; Diseases : Cancer research, prevention, and treatment; Environment : Climate change.

*DCPD Number:* DCPD202100941.