

Remarks at a Christmas Dinner for Special Olympics Athletes
December 10, 2024

Loretta, thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

You know, first of all, welcome to the White House, all the Special Olympics.

And thank you, Loretta, for that introduction and your leadership—and one of our Nation's great special athletes.

You've appeared in 8 World Games, completed in 10 different sports, won 12 medals, run 26 marathons—holy God—speak 5 languages, earned 3 honorary degrees. And you're only 71 years old. *[Laughter]* You're amazing. You're truly amazing. All of you are.

Before I really begin, what I want to say, let me say something about the Shriver-slash-Kennedy family. You know, your mom—your mom—just didn't open her heart to that Special Olympian.

When I got elected in 1971—'72, I was 29 years old. I wasn't legally old enough to be President [Senator; White House correction]; you have to be 30 to be sworn in. And shortly after I got elected, I had to wait 17 days to be eligible to be sworn in—but in the meantime, on the anniversary coming up on the 18th of this month, I was down in Teddy's office—Teddy Kennedy's office, who took care of me—hiring staff. And I got a phone call from my local fire department, telling me there had been an accident. And the poor firewoman they put on the call for me said—I said, "How are they?" They said: "Uh, uh, um, she's dead. Your daughter is dead. And I'm not sure your two sons will make it."

And I, for a while, was very angry at God. And I have—and if you come to my office, I hope you get to see it—a cartoon my dad gave me years later, when I was saying something about "I wish my deceased wife would have been able to see a certain thing in my house." And he went up to the local store—local shopping center and came back with a cartoon, and it was in a gold frame. I've had it for, now, 34 years at my desk. And it's "Hägar the Horrible." And Hägar the Horrible, the Viking, his ship was struck by lightning, and he's standing on the top of a sinking ship and looking up at God and saying, "Why me?" And the next frame is a voice from Heaven comes back and says, "Why not you?" "Why not you?"

That was my dad. It was just about getting up, making sure—and while I was getting up, your mother helped me. Your mother, your family contacted me, because I didn't want to be sworn in. I had told my Governor-elect that I wasn't going to be sworn in. I didn't want to do it. And—but your family—your family—and by the way, one of the reasons I won was because of Sargent Shriver. He showed up—*[applause]*—no.

One of the oldest historic towns in America is New Castle, Delaware. And we have a thing in it, before every election, on election night, called the Torchlight Parade, and it's been going on for, now, 90 years—longer. And we—I needed help. I—Nixon won my State by 60 percent of the vote, and I won by 3,200 votes. And, like you, I had a sister smarter than me. *[Laughter]* And—*[inaudible]*.

And your dad went out of his way. Your dad came to that event and energized the crowd and talked about "this young guy is going to be okay." I'll never forget it.

So, you know, I know from a different angle what a lot of you must feel when you have someone reach out to you when you're really down and things aren't working.

And you know, but here in the East Room, we hosted heads of state. And we ordered—I ordered—we've ordered—awarded Medals of Freedom. Just the other night, we celebrated Kennedy Center's Honors. But being here with the Special Olympians is something I cherish in my—from all my time being President. I mean that. And for that, I want to thank Tim and the whole Shriver family for making it possible.

I think you all underestimate what you do for the community, but you give people hope. They look at you. They see your damn bravery. They see your courage. They see you standing up under circumstances they don't think they can handle, and you do it. And it's all about hope.

My dad used to have an expression. He'd say, "Joey, a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about being able to look people in the eye and say, 'We're like everybody else.'" When you're treated with dignity, it changes everything. And you make people realize they have an obligation to do that.

Tim, you and your children—your siblings, your children, your grandchildren continue your parents' mission of service, empowering others to reach their God-given talent. Eunice and Sarge would be proud. I feel them here today, and always do, by the way.

Thank you for all the supports [supporters; White House correction] of the Special Olympics, including for Congress who are here tonight. One of my good friends, Steny Hoyer, is over there. Steny talks about the Eastern Shore of Maryland. It's really the Western Shore of Delaware. *[Laughter]*

And Tony Coelho—where's Tony? Congressman? Tony, good man. And Senator Roy Blunt. Roy? Thank you, Roy.

We've worked for decades to make our country more accessible and more just. Above all—above all, the athletes here, and to your loved ones, I say, thank you, because you give us hope. If you can do what you did, why can't we do so much more? You're some of the most—you're some of the most driven people I've ever met.

For me and Jill, it's a true honor to host you here at the White House. And this is your house, the "people's house"—I mean it, your house.

The Special Olympics are close to my heart. As it was mentioned already, '71, I attended the Delaware first-ever Special Olympic competition: a track meet at old Wilmington High School. I was a county councilman at the time, an organization that I had just begun. I've just—I've become a big fan ever since.

In 2009, I flew with Mark Shriver to Boise, Idaho, for the Winter Games. In 2010, Jill and I were proud to host all of you at the Naval Observatory, the Vice President's Residence. In 2011, Jill led the Presidential delegation to the World Summer Games in Athens.

In 2018—my son Beau, who passed away because of a year in Iraq—set up the Beau Biden Foundation and partnered with you to protect people with intellectual disabilities and abuse. And when he passed away, all that he had raised for his conflict went to you. It's something—sometimes our—our son—well, I won't get into that, but—throughout it all, it's been clear the Special Olympics is a movement of hope. That's what it's all about: hope and inclusion—no one is excluded—spreading joy, building confidence, opening hearts.

President Lincoln once said everyone deserves, quote, "a fair chance in the race of life." That's what this is all about. Disability isn't something broken to be fixed. For millions of Americans, disability is a source of identity and pride. Every American has an equal right to be recognized for who they are with dignity and with respect.

That's why, as a Senator, I cosponsored our Nation's first major disability rights bill, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Now, I know I look like I'm only 40, but I've been around a while. [Laughter] That was in 1990, and, ladies and gentlemen, that act had a profound impact on people.

Look, the fact is that there's so much more. Why, when I was Vice President and President, our administrations made major investments in education, employment, community-based care for people with disabilities.

And that's why Kamala and our whole administration have worked to stop the use of subminimum wage so no—so tens of thousands of Americans can finally get fairly paid for what they do when they do it and not subminimum wage.

That's why we continued to push to end so-called Social Security marriage penalty, so people with disabilities who don't lose part of their monthly benefits when then marry a person in a similar circumstance that they love.

You know, I want to thank Patrice, another star athlete who's here tonight, working so hard to make all this happen.

And that's not all. We also sent your CEO, Mary, to represent the United States this year at the historic G-7 meeting that finally recognized sports as essential—as essential—to a global disability policy because of you. It matters. You're affecting people's lives all around the world, not just here.

Let me close with this. I know this work is about a lot more than sports. It's about community. It's about health. It's about opportunity. It's about who we are as a nation. What is our character? Where is our heart?

The Special Olympics oath is "Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt." That's the basic American spirit—your spirit. You instill it in everybody. You represent literally—and I mean this from the—I give you my word as a Biden—you represent the best America has to offer—the very best America has to offer.

You know, I mentioned—I've mentioned many times before that my mom had an expression. My mom was Catherine Eugenia Finnegan Biden. She'd look at me, "Joey"—I used to stutter very badly when I was young, even into high school. She'd—"Joey, look at me. Look at me." "I'm looking at you, Mom." She said: "Remember who you are. You're a Biden." And I thought, "Well, that's like, you know—[inaudible]." [Laughter] She said, "Look at me. Joey, bravery resides in every heart, and someday—someday it will be summoned in every heart."

Day after day, that's what you and your entire organization do. You rise up. You lift one another up. You summon immense courage.

And every Special Olympic athlete here tonight and across America, we love you. Every new person I bring to the Special Olympics, they walk away stunned. They walk away stunned about your courage.

Now I'd like to make a toast to the moment. To supporters and volunteers and, above all, the incredible athletes and their brave and courageous hearts—you've got something for me to toast? [Laughter]

[At this point, an aide handed the President a glass.]

I have to admit to you. I'm going to hold this with my left hand. My grandfather Ambrose Finnegan was an all-American football player at Santa Clara. He'd say, "Joey"—I'm the only Irishman you've ever met that's never had a drink in his life. [Laughter] Anyway. But "when you

toast without liquor"—which I don't have here, I've got to admit it—[*laughter*]—"you've got to do it with your left hand, not your right hand."

[*The President offered a toast.*]

So cheers. Cheers. And please, please keep inspiring the country.

And I really—I'm going to say one more thing. I should shush up, but one more thing. You know, I think you underestimate—I generally believe you underestimate the impact you've had on so many people—so many people. Especially when they're down, especially when they think it's over, you lift us up.

So thank you, thank you, thank you. I love you.

And my—there's an old—my—grandfather used to use this—what he facetiously referred to as an "Irish blessing." He said, "May those who love us, love us; and those who don't, may God turn their ankles, so we know they're coming by their limp." [*Laughter*]

Enjoy the White House. It's your house.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:25 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Loretta Claiborne, chief inspiration officer, Timothy Shriver, chairman of the board, Mary Davis, chief executive officer, and Patrice Jetter, New Jersey athlete, Special Olympics; former Rep. Anthony L. Coelho; former Sen. Roy D. Blunt; and Vice President Kamala D. Harris. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens; and journalist and women's health advocate Maria Shriver, sister, and Save the Children Action Network Chief Executive Officer and Special Olympics board member Mark Shriver, brother, of Mr. Shriver. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 11.

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