

Statement on the Death of Helen Fabela Chavez

June 7, 2016

For 88 years, Helen Chavez was a force of quiet strength, but she left a legacy that will echo for generations. Alongside her husband Cesar she devoted her life to organizing farmworkers in California and across America, fighting for higher wages, better working conditions, and a brighter future—La Causa. She managed her union’s finances, prepared meals, marched in picket lines, and was even arrested for her actions, all because she believed in the dignity of America’s farmworkers: men and women she toiled with in the fields, even as she raised eight children and helped lead a movement.

I had the great privilege to meet Helen when I designated the home that she and Ce-

sar lived in for so long as the Cesar E. Chavez National Monument. Michelle and I send our condolences to her many children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, including her granddaughter Julie Chavez Rodriguez, a trusted member of our White House team. And we join them all in celebration of a life well lived, a life that proves those who love their country can change it. *Si se puede.*

NOTE: The statement referred to Sylvia Delgado, Eloise Carillo, Liz Villarino, Anna Ybarra, and Fernando, Paul, and Anthony Chavez, children of Ms. Chavez; and Deputy Director of Public Engagement Julie Chavez Rodriguez.

Eulogy at the Funeral Service for Former Deputy White House Counsel Cassandra Q. Butts

June 7, 2016

The President. Good evening.

Audience members. Good evening.

The President. We are here to celebrate the life of our dear friend Cassandra, a warrior for social justice, a warm and generous servant who devoted her life to bettering the lives of others, and an unbelievable friend.

I first met Cassandra in a place that tends to stoke one’s passions for social and economic justice: the financial aid line at law school. [Laughter] We were just entering Harvard Law. We happened to be next to each other in line, I think it was in Pound Hall, and we were furiously filling out our financial aid forms. I have no doubt I was doing something wrong. She may have looked over my shoulder and said, “I think that’s wrong.” [Laughter] And we were inching forward each time the registrar shouted, “Next!” We introduced ourselves to each other, and we bonded over the fact that we were signing our lives away to Harvard, fully aware of how long it would take us to pay off that debt that we were about to accrue.

And then, we bonded over other things. We bonded over our love for jazz. We bonded over our fandom of Michael Jordan, because she was a Tar Heel and I was a Bull. We talked about our early beginnings in civic engagement, protesting apartheid, her at North Carolina and me at Occidental. And we talked about our interest in the law, why we were there: the notion that we might somehow take this knowledge that we were going to extract from this place and apply it to help those on society’s margins to improve their circumstances.

I made a lot of great friends at Harvard. Some of them are here today, like Judge Wilkins, who was older and cooler than I was at the time and still is. [Laughter] I don’t know about older, but maybe still cooler. But Cassandra I relied on. I relied on her for counsel and for encouragement. I have a confession to make: I still possess some albums of hers. [Laughter] I think there’s a Miles Davis album, a John Coltrane album. I’ve been listening to some of that music since she passed. In my defense, she kept one of my constitutional law

books. [Laughter] But I think I got the better end of that trade. [Laughter]

And that was true generally with Cassandra. Those who knew her, I think, understood that somehow, we were getting the better end of that trade.

In law school, we'd sit around and dream about how we were going to take what we learned in those halls and we'd go change the world. And while we separated for a time after graduation—her coming to Washington, me heading back to Chicago—we stayed in touch. I kept up with her while she was working in Congress and at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. I talked to her about the work I was doing as a civil rights attorney and a professor, and I told her about Michelle and all the hopes and dreams that we had together. And in a lot of ways, she served as a moral compass for me. She was a constant, steady presence.

And when I arrived here in Washington after winning my Senate race, I was 99th in seniority. But I did have a secret weapon, and that was, I knew Cassandra. [Laughter] So I asked her for some advice, and she, of course, went farther than that, helping me to hire a smart, dedicated team, helping me to get a conversation going with Pete Rouse, who had been the chief of staff for Tom Daschle and who had no reason to want to deal with somebody who was 99th in seniority. But somehow, she persuaded him to take a meeting with me, and as a consequence, we were able to put together this remarkable team of people, many of whom still work with me today.

She helped me to plan what I might accomplish on behalf of the people of Illinois. And then, because I thought that she didn't have enough to do, I'd send her early chapters of a book I was writing at 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning just to see what she thought. And we'd try to have dinner at least once a month, just to keep each other grounded, mainly for her to keep me grounded, because she didn't need help on that front.

I didn't know then that I'd run for President just a few short years later. But when I did, I knew that I needed her help. She was one of my most valuable utility players. She was like a

Swiss Army knife: Whatever you needed, you could find. Smart enough to do just about any project, thoughtful enough to help others step in, finding those who might add to our collective efforts.

She was essential in the first days of my administration. Working with Greg Craig and others, she helped to stock our Justice Department with bright, dedicated attorneys. She meticulously crafted our earliest policies so that all who work in the White House hold ourselves to the highest of ethical standards as keepers of the public trust.

In fact, my first Executive orders, which she helped design, reflected both of our views that public service is a privilege, that it's not about advancing yourself or your friends or your clients or your donors or some ideological agenda, it's about advancing the interests of every single American: the pay freeze for senior staff, which made us very popular; the toughest lobbying ban in history; an ethics briefing on what's required of all of us to make sure that we're putting the people's interests above our own, a briefing, by the way, that I was the first person to receive. Each of those policies bore her touch.

And later, as my Deputy Counsel, Cassandra helped to oversee a range of areas, among them the vetting and selection of judicial nominees. And she did that pretty good, because she got one of the finest judges to agree to undergo a difficult process and become an outstanding Supreme Court justice.

But her most lasting impact, at least in my administration, was just being who she was.

Every senior White House appointee in those first days—every single one—had to meet personally with Cassandra. Every single one. That's how much trust I had in her, in her integrity, in her judgment, in her feel for people. She was the person I trusted to ensure that everybody we hired understood the values of this administration and approached their jobs with the kind of professionalism and decency and integrity expected of anyone fortunate enough to serve their country at the highest level.

She knew I wanted the best and the brightest, people with the same kind of high-minded idealism that she and I had talked about late into the night all those years before in law school, what we had imagined might be possible: that politics and government could be different; that this country could be better; that justice could be served, that it wasn't a pipe dream, that it wasn't something in the past, that it was something that could actually be achieved.

What better person to impart that message than Cassandra. What better person to impart upon each of us the notion that there's something bigger than ourselves and that when you give to others and you serve others and you do right by others, that that's what fills you up, that's what makes your life count.

Cassandra was one of those rare people you never wanted to disappoint, not because she was judgmental; she, in fact, was infinitely patient and forgiving of people's foibles. And she used that big, wonderful, deep laugh of hers to make you feel like, yes, everybody is going to make mistakes and everybody is going to screw up. So it wasn't because she was judgmental, it was because you felt somehow that she knew your best self, the person you couldn't always claim to be, but the person you hoped to be. She saw that in you. And I know she made me better, and I believe she made us better.

And if you've spoken to anybody who knew her well over these past several days or any of the innumerable people that she took the time to mentor, you'll hear the same qualities that we were looking for in those early days of the administration applied to her in spades: professionalism, decency, integrity, insight, smarts, humor, and a fundamental kindness. She was a kind person. You know, it's interesting, as you get older, it turns out, kindness counts for a lot.

It's been brought to my attention that, in her final months, Cassandra was working on a passion project: not fine-tuning the sports cars she loved to drive—[laughter]—but rather, funding scholarships for underprivileged high school kids who want to go to college to study

the arts. And that came as no surprise. That's the kind of thing she'd do.

As a society, we have an unfortunate tendency to celebrate the people we love only once they are gone. So it is a testament to Cassandra, to the life that she lived and shared with us, that so many people celebrated her while she was still here. I do wish I had seen her more this past year. I know she would forgive me and smile and comfort me and tell me not to feel too guilty. Because that's who she was.

And I'd like to close my remarks on that note, by paraphrasing something that's stayed with me from a piece I read about her last week. It concluded by saying that Cassandra is survived by her mother, who lives in North Carolina; by her father, who lives in New York; by her sister, her brother-in-law, and her nephews, who she was so proud of, who live in Maryland; and her friends, who live everywhere. Her friends who live everywhere. How true that is.

She was my friend. She was as true a person as I ever met. I loved her dearly, and I will miss her badly.

We pray that the Lord grants our sister, Cassandra, eternal peace. May He bless her memory. May He bless her family and the lives of everyone that she touched.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:11 p.m. at Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church. In his remarks, he referred to Michael Jordan, former guard, National Basketball Association's Chicago Bulls; Robert L. Wilkins, judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit; former Counselor to the President and Interim White House Chief of Staff Peter M. Rouse; former Sen. Thomas A. Daschle; former White House Counsel Gregory B. Craig; Supreme Court Associate Justice Sonia M. Sotomayor; and Mae A. Karim, mother, Charles N. Butts, father, Deidra Abbott, sister, Frank Abbott, brother-in-law, and Alston and Ethan Abbott, nephews, of Ms. Butts. Audio was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.