

Remarks by Gene Nichol at North Carolina Peace
Corps Association 2018 Peace Prize Award
Ceremony February 25, 2018. © 2018 Gene Nichol

Thanks. It's a high honor to be here, in such company. Those who have chosen to live out Vaclav Havel's definition of hope. Which he described not as a prediction of success, or a description of the world around us, but a predisposition of the spirit, a sort of habit of the heart. A conscious choice to live in the belief that we can make a difference in the quality of our shared and sometimes threatened lives. The nobler of contested hypotheses. I'm honored to be in your company.

The Peace Corps. Man. My daughter, as its been mentioned, is in The Gambia as we speak. Living in a tiny village of about 200. Hours away from any other volunteers. Where no one speaks English, no electricity, no fans, no toilettes. An agriculture volunteer, building chicken coops, working on clean water issues, crop changes. Amazingly hot. Six hours from the capital. No internet, unfamiliar food and languages. She was part of the training group for this years new folks. Told me the other say they

were laughing at one of the chat room things where new volunteers were complaining about their circumstance. They were reading out to the assembled – folks complaining about sometimes losing air conditioning sometimes for thirty minutes at night, or having to eat chicken three or four times a week, or having excruciating internet breakdowns. She said their favorite was a new volunteer saying he had to go 20 minutes to get a latte. They sent ‘em a note talking about 8-hours’ worth of donkey and gelly-gelly rides – and then a four-hour plane trip to get a latte. She sends you all best wishes from The Gambia. And I’m first to concede I’m not sure I ever could have done what you did, or what my daughter, Soren, is doing this day. I begin by congratulating you & ‘fessing up I’m the unworthy one in the room.

And I also want to add my congratulations to Learning Outside, your deserving and inspiring award winner. My fellow Orange County folks, from over in Carrboro. Giving kids, including low income kids, experiences in the natural world they wouldn’t have otherwise. Urging toward a lifetime commitment to stewardship – not unlike the Peace Corps in bold affirmation of things larger than one’s

self. This is an especially notable achievement because many in North Carolina think that there is nothing at all natural about life in Carrboro. Learning Outside has proven otherwise.

I'm not going to be very long. But I start, oddly, where my university always asks me to begin. And that is by saying I do not speak for the University of North Carolina. The University I love takes great solace when I offer it opportunity to distance itself from me. Which I do now. It hardly seems necessary. I'm barely allowed to speak AT the University of North Carolina, much less for it. But the University wants you to know that when it comes to the North Carolina General Assembly's war on poor people, on people of color, on women, on the environment, on the LGBT community, it is strictly and fastidiously neutral. I'm not.

“But if the life will not be easy,” John Kennedy said, at the outset, “it will be rich and satisfying.” You are – though some of you might not want to think of this way – those others would warm to it. You are children – even if older ones-- of John Kennedy's Peace Corps, his vision of service and obligation.

It's one not announced much these days. We do recall, of course, not asking what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. That's a shorthand I guess. Musty, out of date, hardly in favor these days with the nation's greatest narcissist.

But Kennedy said his New Frontier was “not a set of promises, but a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to offer the American people, but what I intend to ask of them.” He emphasized what he called “the discipline of self-government, what he referred to in his inaugural as “high standards of strength and sacrifice.” He used the term “New Frontier”, he said, because the pioneers gave “up their safety, their comfort, and sometimes their lives to build a new world. They were not captives of their own doubts, prisoners of their own price tags.’ Their motto was not ‘every man for himself’ but ‘all for the common cause.’

He intended, Kennedy said, ‘to ask the ablest of the country to make whatever sacrifice is required to bring to their government the best talents [in the world] to serve the national interest.’ Regarding

‘public office as a public trust.’ He asked ‘all citizens’, in fact, to call forth their strengths and devote their energies ‘to the betterment of all.’ “The rich must be willing, he demanded, to use some of their riches more wisely, the privileged must be more willing to yield up their privileges to a common good.’ The Peace Corps, he argued, ‘is not designed as an instrument of diplomacy or propaganda or ideological conflict. It is designed to permit our people to exercise more fully their responsibilities in the great common cause of world development.” Pursuing, as he often put it, the Greek definition of happiness: full use of your powers along lines of excellence.’ “Bearing the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.”

Kennedy often used John Winthrop’s vision ‘of a city upon a hill.’ Like Reagan would later. But when Reagan quoted Winthrop it was hard to avoid the conclusion that the president envisioned an admiring world, honoring and envying the American city on the hill – more free, more prosperous, more happy

than the rest of the globe. Kennedy always focused on the second half of the Winthrop quote – “the eyes of all people are upon us.’ That meant, he said, we must be worthy of our power and exercise our strength with wisdom and restraint.’ Quoting Edmund Burke he said ‘we sit on a conspicuous stage and the whole world marks our demeanor. From those so fortunate, much is required.’

Almost lost notions of duty and obligation and sacrifice and demand. Of struggle in a larger effort. Larger even than our own horizon and tribe and section perspective and ideology and pedigree. Larger even than our own nation, or our own nationalism.

I spent some of last summer with Peace Corps volunteers in West Africa. It took me a while to process it. The young women and men did astound. For tiny stipends, living among the resilient but intensely impoverished people they serve – without electricity, toilets or running water, typically in makeshift huts, defenseless against the brutal African heat. Mastering languages I’d never heard of.

Doing work that is neither partisan nor glamorous. Building manageable chicken coops, planting and nurturing orchards, bringing potable water to isolated hamlets, introducing new crops and livestock, combating, first hand, the challenges of AIDS, teaching hopeful, if profoundly isolated students in dilapidated schools. Committing to unfamiliar and gigantically challenging lands. Doing it largely on their own, with few nearby colleagues or available mentors – serving the cause of humanity in what John Kennedy called “the huts and villages of half the globe.”

I saw the strength, the openness and skepticism on their faces. Impatient with the excuses and failures of the past. Dreaming broadly but focused locally. Embracing new cultures rather than disdaining them. Convinced suffering is not alleviated by ideology. Their hearts are large. They deem sacrifice a virtue. They’re certain, to the person, they’d learned more from their hosts than vice versa.

And they foster our national mission. As Colin Powell put it: “we’re strongest when the face of America isn’t only a soldier carrying a gun, but also a diplomat negotiating peace, a Peace Corps

volunteer bringing clean water to a village or a relief worker stepping off a cargo plane.”

In Donald Trump’s world, I’d guess, these young heroes are losers. They toil in obscurity. They come home broke. They put others’ comfort and prospects above their own. They don’t want the world to quake in fear at America’s greatness. Their patriotism calls them to use marked skills, boundless energies and opened arms to forge partnership with less generously blessed peoples across the globe.

To our president, they’re chumps. For him, the only reason to deal with a place like Gambia is to exploit its people and resources. Winners take. They use. They grow the bottom line. They produce bigger buildings, larger portfolios. All the world envies them. Character, selflessness and service aren’t part of the framework. They never enter the calculus. They never have.

Of course, we choose our vision of what Americanism, what the American promise, actually is. That’s why I’m so honored to be in your company. We make our choices. We write our chapters. It is our joint and shared obligation, as Richard Rorty used to put it – ‘to achieve our

nation.” You’ve enrolled. You’ve enlisted. You’ve chosen to live out your path.

You remind me, as my daughter does, of the old Methodist hymn that commands us ‘not to be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong.’ Nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich.”

You wouldn’t think that would be radical or culturally at odds with the mainstream. Turns out that it is. Maybe it always has been. But congratulations and thanks –thanks for your service – in every possible, ennobling sense.

Robert Kennedy said ‘history will judge us on the extent to which we’ve used our gifts to lighten and enrich the lives of our fellows.’ History smiles on Peace Corps volunteers. And as you used your gifts ‘to lighten and enrich’ the lives of your fellows – you found that you are ennobled and powerfully enabled as well. Thanks for letting me join you.

