

**Women's Rights Rally
Cheyenne, WY
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Good morning! It's a brand new day in Cheyenne, Wyoming and I am filled with gratitude to have the opportunity to spend this morning with all of you. I am grateful for your compassion for one another, your strength in numbers, your resolve to stand together in our work to build a safe, supportive, community, where we continue to delve deeper into the meaning of what it is to grow, live, learn, work, play, pray, and stand together in love and compassion in the capital city of the Equality State.

I stand with you again today, one year after having had the honor to share messages of hope and healing with you in this same place last year. This has, indeed, been a year of powerful change. I stand here today changed by one of the two most difficult years of my career.

The first time I experienced a year with so much challenge, I was 23 years old, and I experienced burnout after working in this very town as a child protective services social worker, investigating child abuse and neglect. I had just graduated from college, a brand new social worker, and I wanted to change the world. I was not prepared for the pain I would experience in witnessing the trauma of children and their parents – families experiencing poverty, shame, a lack of resources, grief, and, ultimately violence, sexual abuse, and neglect. And one thing I know now, is that if a child is being abused, it is almost certain that that child's mother is also being abused. What I have learned since I was 23 is that all violence is connected, from our roots centuries ago, to today, and across generations and throughout communities. If one person is not well, this affects all of us. And, the more I know, the more I know there is to learn from the stories and experiences of others.

I left my child protection job at the age of 24 with a resolve to go back to school and learn how to help families heal before violence was the result. I went and earned a master's degree in counseling, and worked with children and families in private practice, and with teen parents trying to make their way in a tough world, empowering voices of oppressed people in storytelling for social justice projects for 26 years.

From the stories of these courageous storytellers – women impacted by sexual assault, women living with HIV, gay youth and their allies impacted by hate, indigenous youth on the Wyoming Indian Reservation working through the effects of generational grief and trauma, and people overcoming addiction and finding hope in social connections with their communities, I went back to school again, with all of the faces of these courageous storytellers in my heart and in my brain, to earn a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. My aim was to gain more strength and knowledge as a minority woman, to bring communities – leaders, lawmakers, directors of programs, young and old, privileged and oppressed, rich and poor, together, in relationships based on equality and hope, to move forward to create safe, supportive, healthy, strong, communities right here in the Equality State.

The second most difficult year of my career has been this one. The Wyoming Health Council and other organizations of caring like ours, have faced deep cuts to our programs, in a year of change and uncertainty, a year marked by federal level cuts to programs designed to assist all of us to have access to high quality health care and social services, even when we may not have the money or the private insurance to get that care. A lack of access to health care and health insurance is one reason women may have a harder time getting out of an abusive relationship, especially when children are involved. So these resources can be the difference between staying and being empowered to leave.

It has been a lonely year, at times, and yet a year of relying on relationships with others, relying on the strength of people everywhere, the courage of storytellers everywhere, to work together to ensure that we continue to do our very best to find creative ways to continue moving forward.

I am here today to say that, there have been challenges, and there are challenges ahead of us. Nevertheless, we persist. More than ever before, we persist, together, and we are making a difference.

Exactly 30 years after that most tough year of my career in 1987, I stand here not alone, but with you, looking back with a sense of gratitude, enjoying the present moment of solidarity and strength here in the Capital of our Equality State (and I keep repeating the words, "Equality State, because we have a lot of work to do in order to live up to our name) on a sunny Saturday morning, and looking forward with a renewed sense of hope and resolve to continue.

I prepared for this visit by considering some key provisions that are needed for tough journeys. I thought of my Grandpa Kishiyama, who sailed to the United States as a 12-year-old boy, by himself with just his 16-year-old brother, and what he must have brought with him for the journey to become a naturalized US citizen. I think of him often, in times of struggle, his humor, his kindness, his forgiveness, and his courage. I have thought about my Grandpa's journey so much in this past year, in a time of a focus on immigration reform and somewhat of a view of immigrants as somehow less than, even though we are a country built by immigrants, save for our First People, our indigenous people, Native Americans, who are the only families in our country who are not immigrants.

So what do we need when we are embarking on a change as huge as leaving the safe ocean beach at the base of Mt. Fuji to follow a dream in a different world? Maybe what each of us packs for a hard and exciting journey might be different. Maybe when one of us does not have an item needed for survival, someone else will share theirs.

So, what do we need as we persist, together, in our quest for women's rights, and, by virtue of that, our quest for a healthy and happy community family?

We need a dream, compassion, hope, and courage.

First, we need a dream and a vision. A dream and a vision for something better across the ocean of uncertainty. This Thursday, March 8, is International Women's Day. It is also known as the United Nations International Women's Rights Day and Day of Peace. And March is also National Social Worker month. And February 14 is often the day of coming together across the globe to celebrate One Billion Rising up together against violence against women. We do have a dream, all of us standing here together today, to eradicate our world and our community of injustice and violence. In this year, we have made so much progress. The #metoo and the time's up movements of multiplying numbers of people, coming forward to share their stories of abuse, assault, and harassment. Just last year, we didn't know this movement would be so strong today.

We need compassion for this journey ahead. We need to help each other and share items from our backpacks with people who may not have that particular item at that particular time. The focus on self-esteem for so many decades brings with it a sense of competition, a sense of getting ahead, for me, myself, and I. So we need a sense self-compassion. Self-compassion reminds us that we all need kindness and caring, a gentle smile, a helping hand. And the encouraging thing about compassion is that, unlike money, it is infinite. I have learned this year that infinite human compassion is what brings us together and moves us forward in pursuit of our dreams. Thank you all for your kind compassion.

We need hope. We need hope that what we are working for will bring a better result. We have hope for a happy, strong family, and acceptance from the new community, as my Grandpa Kishiyama had. We have hope for sunny days and time to celebrate our accomplishments and hope for a world of peace, equity, justice, and love.

In my educational leadership program of study, I learned about the roots of civil rights movements. They were based in hope. Duncan Anrade, a social justice educator, said, there are two kinds of hope.

First, there is false hope – hope without action, hokey hope, hope based on privilege – in which oppressed people are told by those sitting comfortably in their privilege, “if you just try hard enough, like me, you’ll get there. Just pull yourself up by your bootstraps, get strong, try harder, and it will get better.” We all know that this is not often attainable.

Anrade then talks about critical hope – audacious hope – hope that is required when growing roses in concrete, he says. I like to think of it as hope required when gardening in Wyoming. This kind of hope is based on listening critically to the stories of others, and thinking with and on behalf of people who are struggling, to work toward systemic change – to help create a better, stronger, healthier, more peaceful world together.

Anrade says we can begin by connecting people with other people to critically look at what’s not working and fix it together. He says we begin with relationships.

He says when he has a student in front of him who is struggling with poverty, grief, loss, and a loss of hope, he connects them with hope, and that hope almost always is in the form of connection with another human who is there to listen to that youth’s story and connect that child with real resources and, most importantly, believes that child’s story. (And, speaking of students and hope, I want to thank my University of Wyoming Social Work students for coming here today. These young students are our future, and they bring us hope and inspiration every day).

Maya Angelou said, “When someone shares their story with you, believe them the first time.” Critical, audacious hope involves hearing the stories of our fellow people, believing them, and taking the time to connect.

I think we are well on our way with the #metoo movement. Nevertheless, there is much work to be done if we aim to avoid hokey hope. There are still vulnerable people, oppressed people, people affected by racism, discrimination, and generational grief and trauma, and we must dig deeper and more critically in order to be certain we do not leave them behind or ride on their backs in our excitement to progress. If you are one of those people here today, I am here to tell you, we are invested in critical, audacious hope with and on behalf of you, and we will not give up, and we will not leave you behind, and we will not weigh you down and ride on your backs under the guise of working on your behalf.

Another key provision we need as we journey together toward our dream for peace, is courage.

The six attributes of courage, written about by psychologist Dr. Melanie Greenburg, are:

- 1) **Feeling fear, yet choosing to act.** Sharing our stories requires courage. More sharing is possible when stories within us are met with compassion, giving us a sense of hope -- real, critical hope, that when we share our truths authentically, there will be a safety net of support, love, and a critical commitment to real change – changes in our laws and our policies, and our environments.

If you have an untold story within you, we are compassionate. We understand that there is much more work to be done to create safe spaces before you may feel safe in that sharing. Be compassionate with yourself. This self-compassion is also courageous.

I want to take a moment to thank my parents, Jim and Jan Hammer, who taught me to act, even in the face of fear. My mom is the embodiment of all of the peace and feminist strength we are seeking. She taught me that if I see something, do something. I remember several times when I have actually been afraid for her, because she is so small, and never cowers when she sees another person being hurt or bullied. She stands up and is anything but small when she does so! And my Dad, raised with racist ideals, moved on from hate to become a social justice advocate who worked for the rights of vulnerable people his entire career as a social worker. I would also like to recognize my husband, Mark, who is here and who works with and on behalf of children with disabilities each day as a special education teacher. On a related note, we also need to work together to ensure that our children and teachers are safe from mass gun violence within schools.

- 2) **Another attribute of courage is following your heart.** Women lead with our hearts. We often lead with intuition. These are valuable strengths, and it requires courage to follow your heart, in a world where data and numbers and money and quantity have been so valued. But in this year, I see us following our hearts and leading as women, with love and heart. This is the Year of the Woman. Let us lead as we know how to lead!
- 3) **The third attribute of courage is persevering in the face of adversity.** Together, we persevere. We are all in this together, and this makes it safer and better to face adversity as one. We are here, doing this together, today. Thank you for persevering together. We are stronger together.
- 4) **The fourth attribute of courage is standing up for what is right.** Again, here we are, today, taking a stand against violence. Standing up for the rights of all. My request to you here today is to continue to take a stand, critically, digging deeper, to ensure that we do not leave others behind. There is much work to do in empowering voices of those who have been silenced by systems of power and control, throughout history. Please, remember to lead with your heart, while thinking critically with your wise mind, to consider issues of immigration, human trafficking, human slavery, poverty, racism, and oppression, and keep an open heart and an open mind in order to most effectively stand up for what is right.
- 5) **The fifth attribute of courage is to expand your horizons, and leave the familiar behind.** We are doing this together, as well. We are working to leave violence behind. We are working to leave hatred behind. We are working to leave oppression and racism that are inextricably intertwined with violence – behind. But what I am hoping to ask of you today, to NOT leave behind are the most isolated, vulnerable, oppressed people. We still have work to do to change our systems that have been built on a master narrative for so many centuries. There is another narrative, and we are just beginning to write it together. It is one of inclusion, of compassion, of caring, and of critical hope. An example of this is leaving behind the mere words, “Equality State,” and continuing to think and plan and do critically, until we are healed together, living together in a truly socially just and equitable place.
- 6) **And finally, the sixth attribute of courage is facing suffering with dignity and faith.** We must believe the suffering of our brothers and sisters, no matter how scary and unpleasant that might be. Only then, can we truly begin to heal. We have a great start.

Thank you for being here today to act together in courage and equity, with a dream for a world without violence. I want to leave you with words of hope from Maya Angelou.

Human Family

I note the obvious differences
In the human family
Some of us are serious
Some thrive on comedy

Some declare their lives are lived
As true profundity
And others claim they really live

The real reality
The variety of our skin tones
Can confuse, bemuse, delight
Brown and pink and beige and purple

Tan and blue and white
I've sailed upon the seven seas
And stopped in every land
I've seen the wonders of the world
Not yet one common man

I know ten thousand women
Called Jane and Mary Jane
But I've not seen any two who really were the same

Mirror twins are different
Although their features jibe
And lovers think quite different thoughts
While lying side by side

We love and lose in China
We weep on England's moors
And laugh and moan in Guinea
And thrive on Spanish shores
We seek success in Finland
Are born and die in Maine
In minor ways we differ
In major we're the same

I note the obvious differences
Between each sort and type
But we are more alike, my friends
Than we are unlike

We are more alike, my friends,
Than we are unlike
We are more alike, my friends,
Than we are unlike

