Gail Spangenberg Remarks

Coalition for Literacy Event

Capitol Hill 9-25-18

Thank you so much for this wonderful award. I’m truly humbled to be its first recipient. So many other leaders are equally deserving – amazing colleagues that I’ve had the honor to work with over the years: Paul Delker, Cheryl King, Peter Waite, Jim Parker, and Jodi Crandall come to mind, just for starters. These are some of the many people who should be in the Adult Education Hall of Fame whenever the field establishes one.

The most exciting thing about today is that the Barbara Bush Lifetime Achievement Award in Adult Literacy is being launched as an annual event. Barbara once commented that our greatness as a nation depends on having an educated and literate population. What a great way to honor her – nobody was more of a literacy champion than she was, not just from the White House, but from the Vice President’s mansion and even well before that.

The last time I saw her was at an invitational family literacy luncheon held in her honor in Houston 2-3 years ago. She came decked out in a bright red top and white slacks, topped off with that great head of hair she had, to be celebrated by about 30 people from the field. We’d been told she loved pearls, so we gave her a handsome string of pearls on that occasion. Barbara was an inspiring presence then and she is now. We were all really proud to be there with her.

I’ll share a funny moment that occurred at the end of that get-together. As I was leaving I looked over at President Bush who was sitting off at the side in his wheelchair. Barbara was surrounded by a group of admirers, so on impulse, I went over, knelt down, and said to him: “I don’t really know you well enough to do this,” and I planted a kiss on his cheek. He grinned and said: “In Italy, they get three.” Until today the only people other than Mr. Bush and myself who knew that were the security guards standing nearby.

Thanks again so much for this honor. It just goes to prove that good things can happen in old age. And thanks for your dedication to our ongoing adult literacy cause. It’ll need you all tomorrow as much as it does today.