

## University of Michigan Symposium for Social Justice in Healthcare Closing Keynote Speech - 2006

Good evening.

I'm honored to be here, among so many current and future leaders of the social justice movement. I'm also humbled to speak alongside the brilliant educators, artists and activists who've joined us here today. Let's take a moment to thank them for their wonderful contributions to this symposium.

And now, I'm going to do something that's probably never been done before in the entire history of social justice seminars. I'm going to start my remarks with a quote from Joseph Stalin: "The death of one man is a tragedy, the death of millions is a statistic."

This quote is disturbing, but it helps keep the following numbers in perspective. Because the U.S. Census Bureau's 2005 statistics paint a grim picture that's hard for the world's richest country to grasp:

In America today, 37 million people live in poverty.

The poverty rate for Hispanics stands at 21.8 percent, with African Americans at 24.9 percent and Native Americans at 25.3 percent.

46.6 million people lack health insurance.

This number includes 17.9 percent of Asians, along with 19.6 percent of African Americans, and a staggering 32.7 percent of Latinos.

When you hear these kinds of numbers, it's easy to tune out. They seem so impersonal, so hard to imagine. But as you consider these statistics, try to put faces to the numbers. Imagine your friends and family, your students and co-workers, each of them facing cruel decisions. Will they buy food and pay the rent, or purchase their medications? Will they ignore their pain or illness, or face bankruptcy due to medical bills?

For millions of Americans, these questions are very real – and so are their consequences. A 2004 study by the Institute of Medicine found that 18,000 Americans die each year because they don't have health insurance. To put this number in perspective, we lost almost 3000 people on September 11. Inadequate healthcare kills six times that number - *every year*.

That's why the conversations we've had today could not come at a better time. As Dr. Smith described, social justice and health are impossible to separate. If you work with underprivileged communities, you know this well. As a medical interpreter at the U of M hospital, I've observed that insurance issues are just one of the obstacles my Latino patients face. For some of them, just getting to an appointment is a challenge, since they don't have a car or a driver's license. Even with the help of an interpreter, many struggle

to understand their doctors, since they may only have a second grade education. If a doctor tells them to eat healthier food, they may not have the money to buy it. If a therapist recommends time off work, they may not be able to afford it. For them, health care is one part of a broader struggle. Poverty affects their health, and poor health contributes to their poverty. You cannot solve one problem without addressing the other.

This can be a hard message to accept. If solving the problem of healthcare is challenging, solving the problem of poverty can seem almost impossible. But I believe that social justice workers today have a unique opportunity to do both. On August 29 of last year, when Katrina struck New Orleans, poverty became a national issue overnight. Suddenly the poor were no longer just statistics. They became real people with real problems. For weeks, their suffering was broadcast to TV's across the country. Thanks to this press coverage, many Americans came to a new awareness of our country's profound lack of social justice. And this new awareness provides us with an opening. People are becoming more receptive to discussion of social justice issues. Even if they don't agree on how to respond to it, they recognize that a problem exists.

A similar dynamic is taking shape in the healthcare debate. Polls show that Americans have grown tired of the high costs and gross inefficiencies of our healthcare system. There is a growing desire for change, and an openness to new solutions. The question we need to ask ourselves is this: what's the best way for us to take advantage of this favorable climate to create a truly just society?

I believe the answer to this question lies in the title of this year's LS&A theme semester: ***The Theory and Practice of Citizenship: From the Local to the Global***. Let's start at the beginning – with citizenship. If there's one thing I've learned in my work as an advocate for the Latino community, it's the importance of working as a group. In 2003, when I began my advocacy work, the only thing I knew was that I wanted to help Latinos. I didn't know what form my work would take. But I knew I couldn't do it alone. When my husband and I began to publish La Voz Latina Newspaper, our goal was to provide Spanish language information for underserved Latino immigrants. But with no experience in publishing and little funding, we never could have achieved that goal without the support of the local community. Thanks to their help, we were able to get valuable information into the hands of thousands of area Latinos. We had a similar experience when we began organizing the Festival Latino, an annual cultural celebration and health fair in Ypsilanti. Staging an event of that magnitude required a lot of work, and again it was other community members – including many Latinos themselves - who came forward and helped make the Festival a success.

The lesson from these experiences was clear: if you want to cause positive change, get your community involved. Yet many of us in social justice work tend to overlook this. We feel it's up to us alone to save the world – whether the world likes it or not. But in a democracy, nothing happens without the support of a clear majority – or a powerful minority. And like it or not, social justice workers are not currently a powerful minority. So our only option is to rally the support of the majority of U.S. citizens behind our goals.

But here is where “citizenship in practice” becomes more important than “citizenship in theory.” It’s not enough for most Americans to simply agree with us on social justice issues – in most cases, they already do. What we need to do is inspire our fellow citizens to act – and to continue acting until specific goals are achieved. I believe that the best way to do this is by focusing on shared responsibility. Everyone in America is weakened by societal problems. So everyone in America – citizens, residents, and undocumented immigrants – shares the responsibility to solve them. Poverty is not a problem only for the poor – it’s a problem for all of us. The failings of government are not simply the responsibility of politicians or their parties – they’re the responsibility of us all. The “Don’t blame me, I voted for Kerry” approach does not work. If we become politically active only long enough to vote, then turn our backs on the government until the next election, we shouldn’t be surprised when our leaders screw everything up. A government is like a young child – it’ll try to get away with something if it knows you’re not paying attention.

American society will truly thrive only when we recognize that we’re all in this together. Our government, like our society, belongs to us all. And it’s up to all of us to make it work. As long as we define ourselves primarily by our differences – whether they’re political, economic or ethnic - we will struggle to get things done. This doesn’t mean we must surrender to conformity or devalue diversity. It simply means we must recognize that our shared humanity is by far the most important thing in life. This realization has the potential to transform our country – and our world. If it took hold, we wouldn’t need a hurricane to remind us of our fellow Americans’ poverty. Eliminating poverty would be a top national priority throughout the year - regardless of which political party was in charge. 46 million uninsured people wouldn’t be a dry statistic in a government report. It would be a national outrage, and a clear call to action.

Maybe the America I’m describing sounds far-fetched. Maybe the world I’m envisioning seems unrealistic. But after a day like today, one thing is clear. A better world is possible. There are reasons for hope in every corner of this room. And there are signs of progress throughout our community. Together, I’m confident that we can transform our society – locally, nationally and globally. And there’s no better time than right now.