

Tim Shriver

Remarks at The White House, Special Olympics/Unified Generation Dinner

July 31, 2014

Mr. President

Mrs. Obama

On behalf of our Board, our CEO Janet Froetscher, and over 5 million athletes and family members and donors and volunteers in 170 countries, Linda and I extend to you Mr. President and Mrs. Obama, our deepest thanks. And to our great friends at Coke and ESPN, thanks for joining us at the greatest address freedom has ever known!

In 2008, the President-Elect of the United States, Barack Obama announced to millions of supports in Chicago and around the world: “Change has come to America.” Thank God! it’s still coming!!

40 years earlier, just a stone’s throw away from Grant Park, another great American – a woman named Eunice Kennedy Shriver – announced another change. Her perch was a largely empty Soldier’s Field. With her were only one thousand or so people, coming from closets and institutions. 6 years earlier, her brother the President had said, “Those of us who have seen children live in the shadows can’t possibly justify the neglect.”

There in Chicago, another change came to America. The long shadow of history and suffering began to yield to light. Those who had for so long been victims were revealed to be champions. Now it is our

turn to make a difference. The world, as Mayor Daley said that day, will never be the same.

We have learned so much since 1968. We have learned that we must slow down to see each other, learned that millions of people want the authenticity that our athletes have, learned that in the end, good really is more powerful than evil.

But we also know we must be fearless in pursuit of this longed-for unity. After all, as many as 80% of women with intellectual disabilities have been victims of sexual assault, as many as 90% of children with intellectual disabilities never attended school; the vast majority are overlooked by doctors and health care workers in poor and rich countries alike. The vast majority never get a job. The majority are either obese or malnourished. Some are called “cursed.” Still others tied up with animals. Some are nearly broken by the loneliness and despair.

But like the voice of Maya Angelou cracking our hearts open from her perch in eternity, millions of these extraordinary human beings rise.

[When she addressed the athletes in 1999, she took our breath away with her voice and her words have lost none of their power tonight:

“We try on a meeting like this, in this beautiful multi-colored meeting, we try to be optimistic and we discover the miracle of just being together is a miracle. That each child is a miracle. It’s amazing; here we are so special. Understanding that each child belongs to each of us and that because of them we rise.”]

There are Special Olympics 4.5 million freedom fighters and they are rising in China, in Afghanistan, in Rwanda and Rio, in Jerusalem and Ramallah, in Damascus and Delhi, and in Los Angeles California. They play their Special Olympics games – over 80,000 of them every year – each one a celebration and a demand: Plan Unified! Join us! Come out and have the fun of your life.

Now it is our turn to continue the change with you Mr. President and you Mrs. Obama. But though it may seem audacious to say in the presence of the President, our leaders are the athletes themselves – people who often have nothing but who give endlessly. People who are pushed out by who welcome everyone in. People who receive ridicule but give back love. People who somehow know that by giving yourself away, you receive the best self in return. How lucky are we to be in their presence.

Theirs is a revolution like nothing the world has ever seen. They will celebrate it with a festival of unity in Los Angeles California next summer at the World Games. Mark your calendar: California here we come! But they are challenging us every day too, to grow the voices of freedom, to engage all our young brothers and sisters in work and play that gives life meaning and purpose

Welcome to the games of the heart. Welcome to the Unified Generation. Welcome to Special Olympics!

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