

DC Vote Champions of Democracy

October 22, 2008

Remarks by Daniel Solomon

Thank you Joe for making tonight possible. It's no exaggeration to say that without Joe Sternlieb, there'd be no DC Vote.

And thank you for your kind words, Ilir and Bruce. As far as I'm concerned, though, tonight is not about me; it's about all of us in this room and all those who have helped DC Vote come of age.

I used to say that I didn't want to die without ever having voted for a United States Senator. Now that my wife Jane and I have two wonderful sons growing up in Washington, I've revised my wish list.

I want Sammy and Moey to be able to run for the U.S. Senate. Unfortunately, the future senators had to go to bed, but you can see them on the back of tonight's program book.

Jane, of course, is here, just as she has been at my side and in my corner through 10 years of dinners missed and chores not done. She's been my constant source of support and wisdom.

She may rue the evening in Joe Sternlieb and Linda Singer's home more than 10 years ago when she said "Sure. Go for it," but no one deserves more thanks for helping us make it and for being the best life partner I could ever have hoped for. Thank you, Jane.

The current Presidential election, where both candidates have loudly, and repeatedly, called for "CHANGE," reminds me of a famous quotation. You'll recognize the first two sentences, but listen for the third one.

"Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or both."

Of course those are the words of American abolitionist, lecturer, author, one-time slave, and DC resident, Frederick Douglass. They are quite a call to action.

DC residents have been making the demand for their full rights as American citizens ever since the Federal City was created in 1801. The League of Women Voters was in this fight before I was born – and they still are. So why DC Vote and why now?

In 1996 & 97 a few dozen DC residents took their demand for democracy to the courts.

In the end, the lawsuits were unsuccessful, but there were a few activists who went and asked the lawyers, "Who is doing the grassroots organizing, working the press, educating Congress?" And we were told, "Nobody. You should." (aahh the danger of asking a good question)

Well, our handful of organizers grew to a room-full and the work began in earnest – on a volunteer basis over the course of a year. But we learned that there's only so much you can ask of volunteers, especially over a longer period of time, and another thing we realized was that this was going to be a long-term struggle.

It became apparent that without full-time paid staff, consistent direction, a strategic plan, fundraising capacity, a lot of partners, a unified message, a lobbying plan, an education program, a website, and all the other components of a major coalition effort, we would never succeed. And so DC Vote was born.

A lot of people joined together to help make the demand through this new organization.

I'd like to personally name the 40 committed activists who met regularly in church basements, public libraries, and crowded apartments to plan the first rallies and write the first press releases.

I'd like to thank the 30 people who have taken the responsibility to serve on the board of DC Vote since 1998.

I'd like to recognize the scores of employees and hundreds and hundreds of volunteers who have poured their lives into helping DC Vote succeed.

I'd like to express my gratitude to the dozen local foundations that took a flier on us when we had a few good ideas, and little else.

But time constraints, and impending dessert, demand that I only name a few to represent all of you.

I start with Diane Bernstein, who was the first person I asked for money, after my mom Lillian--and Lil didn't think we had a chance, perhaps Diane didn't either--but Diane and Norman Bernstein said yes, and yes again every year thereafter. Dick and Lois England were the next to put their money behind the demand for voting rights.

My sister Diane and her husband, Stuart Brown, and my brother David and his wife Lisa have supported DC Vote and this event well beyond what even siblings can reasonably be expected to do, especially since none of them even lives in DC any more.

Kathy Schmidt, the quintessential supervolunteer, has quietly served in every conceivable capacity with DC Vote, so determined is she to end the injustice and wrong done to DC citizens every day.

The Eugene and Agnes Meyer Foundation, thank you for giving us our first grant, which gave us your “Good Grantmaking” Seal of Approval that opened so many other foundation doors to us, and for your smart money: providing a technology circuit rider to help us, and many other non-profits, improve our web and other information technology; for your management assistance grants – Lord knows we needed them at times; and for your coveted Exponent Award, which recognized the outstanding leadership that Ilir Zherka has brought in his six years at the helm of DC Vote.

Thank you Cynthia Robbins, now a DC Vote board member, but back then you were our grant manager at Meyer. Thank you for making us sharpen our proposal through innumerable re-writes, and a huge thank you to Julie Rogers, Meyer President, for your vision of what DC Vote might become. I think you knew better than we did.

Throughout the last 10 years, thousands of DC residents have been able to both make their demand for democracy and be heard because of DC Vote’s presence as a leader, a center, a catalyst.

7 or 8 years ago Sarah Shapiro called-in to Mark Plotkin’s “Politics Hour” with the brilliant idea of putting “taxation without representation” on DC license plates – and DC Vote put in the time and effort to make it happen.

By my estimation, we’ve now got hundreds of thousands of cars out on the road every day educating millions of tourists and giving a little poke to hundreds of Members of Congress.

DC’s Young Suffragists have written their songs – including the ever-popular “Do You Have a Senator” – and DC Vote has provided events where this youngest set of civil rights activists can spread their story of injustice and wrong.

Democracy for DC has long been a priority of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. Working closely with Ilir, Congressional leaders and the 80-organization strong DC Vote coalition, Wade Henderson has helped to shape the demand for full democracy into a bill that Congress could actually pass – and of course we are tantalizingly close: only 3 votes shy in the Senate.

500 people of every race, age, and political party, representing both business and labor, came out on a freezing cold day in February 2007, blanketing the House of Representatives to demand a full vote.

Five thousand marched down Pennsylvania Avenue two months later in ferocious wind and rain to make the same demand of the Senate.

George and Trish Vradenburg are one of DC’s ultimate bipartisan power-couples, and George penned a strong op-ed on why DC voting rights deserves bipartisan support, proclaiming: “This Republican is willing to have a Democrat represent me – at least I would have a vote and a voting representative in Congress that I could petition.”

Dick England connected me with his nephew, the former editor of the Louisville Courier – who penned a letter to his Senator and friend, Mitch McConnell, asking the Minority Leader of the Senate to permit a vote on the DC Voting Rights Act.

Unfortunately he's done everything he could to defeat our bill. But from what I've heard, the voters of Kentucky may be about to send their own message to Senator McConnell on November 4th.

Like everyone, I've been following our economy's roller coaster ride and our government's dramatic responses, but for those of us who live in DC, we know we don't have a full say in the Congress, and frankly, it gets me steamed.

When I add this latest issue to the accumulated insults of the last generation – no vote on waging war, on protecting our planet, on health care, on how my tax dollars are spent – I have reached the limit, in Frederick Douglass's words, of the injustice and wrong that I will tolerate.

I may even be prepared to resort to blows, though I'm not sure how effective mine would be. And I am absolutely ready to "resist with words," to end the continued denial of our basic right of citizenship.

But I cannot do it alone. DC Vote cannot do it alone. Even the millions represented by the 80 local and national groups that comprise our Coalition cannot do it alone.

But with the commitment of all of you in this room and all of the people you touch and reach and represent, we can and we will bring democracy to our nation's capital.

Power concedes nothing without a demand.

Thank you for joining with us to make that demand and to win this 21st Century civil rights battle.

Thank you all for this very, very special honor.