

Women's Fund of Rhode Island

Remarks made by Simone P. Joyaux, ACFRE, Founder and Chair

On the occasion of the third anniversary celebration of the Women's Fund • 2004

Introduction

On Thursday, November 18, 2004, more than 600 people gathered together to celebrate the third anniversary of the Women's Fund. The keynote speaker was Marcia Ann Gillespie, former editor-in-chief of Ms. and Essence magazines, and a leading activist in the national and international women's movements. In response to the 2004 election, Marcia spoke about faith and hope and the long journey to make change.

Simone began her remarks with a moment of silence in honor of Nancy Gewirtz, social justice advocate and inspiring Rhode Island activist. Nancy died on November 14, 2004. Simone's remarks are below.

Leveling the playing field for women and girls

The Women's Fund of Rhode Island uses its grantmaking and other activities to help level the playing field for women and girls.

Some people ask me why we need a Women's Fund. They tell me that a women's fund is quaint and anachronistic because women's issues have been addressed and all is fixed. But that's not true. **Is there injustice for women and girls? Yes absolutely.** Here are just a couple of examples:

- **Pay equity** – there's a 20% gap between wages earned by men and women – and the gap cannot be explained by differences in education or experience. So the Women's Fund has given a number of grants to help women's economic self-sufficiency.
 - A grant that helps women get into construction careers, a traditionally male-only workplace
 - A grant to develop women as leaders in the labor and economic justice movement
 - A grant for girls to develop a micro-enterprise that concentrates on environmentally safe gardening supplies.
- **Women's political participation** – in public policy and elected office – is abysmally low in RI and in the US. Just take a look at the lack of women in statewide offices, in our US Congressional delegation, and in our RI General Assembly. And the US itself ranks 61st in the world in the number of women who are elected to the federal government. So the Women's Fund has given a number of grants to address this issue:
 - Training women to run for office
 - Helping women engage at the policy and electoral levels

These are just a few of the grants the WFRI's has made to help ensure justice for women and girls. But the need is much greater. Economic self-sufficiency. Health and well being. Education. Political participation. Reproductive choice. Self-esteem and leadership. All of these are issues facing women and girls.

For many of us in this room, life is pretty darn good. We don't have to worry about many of these issues.

But even for those of us with privilege, we face some form of gender bias: pay equity, political participation, we do not have the rights and benefits of marriage, we may lose our reproductive choice

This is injustice. And we have a responsibility to speak out for ourselves – and for all the other women and girls who may not be able to speak out for themselves.

This is difficult work – and the issues are often uncomfortable. But the Women's Fund is committed to focusing attention on inequities and advocating for change.

I asked various people why they think WFRI is important. Here is what they said:

Jessica Ricardo, an attendee at the first annual Women's Fund event said: Some people say that today everything is equal, regardless of the statistics that directly refute this. As a young women of only 18, still clinging to the last shreds of my idealism, I can only hope that one day the WFRI will be out of work. Until then, I thank you for all that you do.

Brian Cavanagh, donor said: The Cavanagh family concentrates its charitable giving in the area of basic human needs. The Women's Fund is effective in identifying needs particular to women. Often these are people and causes that would fall through the cracks of our social net. The Women's Fund's grants are often unique, carefully deliberated, and they do make a difference.

Rogean B. Makowski of the Washington Trust Company said: Women, especially small business owners, have been the impetus for economic growth in this country. Washington Trust is proud to support the accomplishments of women and to promote independence, strength and knowledge of our young girls and women by creating leadership opportunities through collaboration and education in our state.

A donor in her 70s said: The Women's Fund is for those women who are not considered 'suitable' by the establishment but live in the real, and not so nice, world. Everyone should have the opportunity to be the best that they can be. Reaching that goal and not having to be second best – or putting up with crap because it has always been that way is not good enough.

William Lynn McKinney, URI professor and WFRI donor: I live for a day when everyone will be accorded "unearned dignity," the right to unquestioned full participation in all aspects of life simply by having been born. But until we get there, The Women's Fund represents our commitment to ourselves and to one another to do what the broader society and our federal government is not yet doing.

Mary-Kim Arnold, working in the Alumni Office at Brown University and one of our volunteers said: I have an 8-year-old daughter, who does not yet talk in terms of what she can and cannot do. We watched "Bend It Like Beckham" together, and my heart filled with pride, when after the protagonist's father admonishes her: "You have to start acting like a girl," my daughter, with visible frustration, announced, "She IS acting like a girl. She is doing what she wants to do with her life." I am involved in WFRI so that my daughter can continue to hold that belief. To me and to my daughter, WFRI means hope for the future.

Mary-Kim went on to say: I am a middle-class woman of color of considerable privilege: I am a college graduate. I own my own home. My resources and my access MUST be used to further social justice and equity for all those who cannot advocate for themselves. Women and girls, communities of color, the socio-economically disadvantaged, queer communities, immigrant communities, survivors of domestic violence and abuse. Whatever voice I have, I must use to give voice to the voiceless of our society.

These are only some of the voices of the Women's Fund.

Remember: This room is special – not unique in Rhode Island – but rare. In this room, it doesn't matter if you are female or male, Democrat or Republican, homosexual or heterosexual, of color or white, old or young, wealthy or poor.

In this room, it's about equity for all. It's about embracing values that are inclusive and progressive.

You can count on the Women's Fund to speak out for social justice, even when it is uncomfortable to do so --- Because at the Women's Fund:

- We believe that people deserve a living wage and minimum wage isn't even close.
- We believe that women have the right to choose and everyone has the right to marry.
- We believe that at least 1/2 of our elected representatives should be women.
- We believe that more women should be in more boardrooms.
- We believe that a woman should be president soon.

Yes, at the Women's Fund we believe in fundamental change and that's why we exist. And we believe in a culture where being a woman is not an instant disadvantage.

I hope that you have filled out your own *Personal Promise* form on your table. You can make the difference and together we can make change. Thank you and good night.