

Why I Act

Speech written by Joseph Busig for the day of the League of Women Voters of Whidbey Island's Legislative Brunch (1/25/2020)

Greetings to all distinguished guests this fine morning. My name is Joseph Busig, and I was invited by the League of Women Voters of Whidbey Island to speak at this wonderful event. Before I begin, I would like to take a moment for all of us to recognize the land on which we are present. Reflecting upon the Indigenous people who resided here for many generations before being forced into confederation, being confined to reservations, and enduring the atrocities from colonization, assimilation, and genocide. This land, including Kla-tole-tsche now called Oak Harbor, once only knew the steps of the Lower Skagit, Swinomish, Suquamish, Klallam, and Snohomish people. Join me in observance. (10 second pause) Thank you.

It is an honor to have been invited here by the League of Women Voters of Whidbey Island to be the introductory speaker to their annual Legislative Brunch. I was speaking with Co-President Karol Pulliam about the importance of this event. How it is a chance for residents of the area to connect with elected officials, granting us a moment to meet and get to know them as well as express concerns or raise questions about the issues that we face everyday. A thank you to the League.

A little bit about myself: I was born in Coupeville and raised in Oak Harbor, so I've lived on Whidbey Island my entire life! I graduated from Oak Harbor High School in 2018 and now attend Skagit Valley College where I will be graduating from this summer!

I am involved on the Oak Harbor Youth Coalition, the Citizens Against Domestic & Sexual Board of Trustees (or CADA Board), a volunteer for Oak Harbor Public Schools, co-advisor of the high school's Students Against Destructive Decisions club, a member of the League of Women Voters of Whidbey Island, a commissioner on the Island County Planning Commission, and the recipient of the Princess Diana Award as well as the Island County Linda Lee Marten's Community Health Hero Award.

From 2018 to 2019 I also ran for Oak Harbor City Council, Position #3 where I was able to speak with over 5,000 residents of Oak Harbor about the issues that faced them. I am the youngest person in both the county and Oak Harbor to have sought public office. While I lost, I do not view it as such. It was an opportunity to grow and let people know that there are still people that care about serving them.

I get this question a fair amount, and this is the main reason as to why I was invited to be the introductory speaker.

“Why are you so engaged? You’re only 19, how come you’re so involved?”

This is a fair question, and I understand why people would want to ask it. I’m not your typical candidate. But I do represent a larger, broader overlooked group often wrote off or negated in the process. That is young people. Young people have often led the charge on many fronts. The American Revolution had many participants, ranging from people in their early teens to their mid-twenties. Framers, legislators, political philosophers, and soldiers alike.

The suffragette and feminist movements, the fight for labor rights, the civil rights marches, war protests from Vietnam to Iran, the struggle of LGBTQIA+ equality, and now the climate demonstrations. These all too have things in common. That is young people. Particularly working class young people of color.

I recall learning in school how we were taught that the United States is the greatest country in the world. How anyone can become anything. That freedom and liberty were upheld above all else. Yet, these were not the conditions for all people, and still are not. Reading history textbooks, studying foreign policy, and even speaking with friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors this hasn’t been their case either.

The day of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. just passed a while ago. His name or legacy are inescapable to my mind when service or action is mentioned. King is an inspiration for many. However, the Rev. Dr. means something more to me. In reading his essays, listening to and examining his speeches, as well as studying his life, he is more than a face behind a quote. A mural for a school to paint. He is more than a time for Americans to look back on and feel good about. The work and life of King was not one of romanticism where people can pick a

few phrases they idolize from him. He stood for justice and liberation above all else.

King spoke out against segregation indeed. But more so he testified the issues of universality, that the working class were all impacted by. He stood for reforming our economic system. He saw the devastation of working class people, how poverty caused immense disparities. The lack of education, lack of medical care, lack of decent housing, lack of opportunities, and lack of dignity transcended imposed societal barriers and bridged solidarity.

He saw the plight Vietnam wrought on people. A majority of those drafted were poor and working class. The countless Vietnamese lost, the desolation of Vietnam and its surrounding neighbors, the loss of U.S soldiers, the displacement of veterans, my family, returning from a war not one person had any notion of why it was waged but for the sole purpose of industrial greed and undemocratic regime change.

With the cost of needless war, needless lives were lost. Billions of dollars spent that could have been allocated to Americans was drained. Bombs replaced where books could have been and machines of war replaced medical care for working families. King took a hard stance against war, imperialism, colonization, and militarism.

King was unapologetically unpopular in his time. He was labeled as unpatriotic, un-American, and an extremist by many. But he recognized that so long as injustice was present, justice was the only course of action to take. He knew that while there was hypocrisy amongst some of the founders, that held slaves, who wrote “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” were far from perfect. Yet were those not the ideals inscribed on that parchment 244 years ago?

Or not the preamble that affirms “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” written 233 years ago?

King was a servant leader, and knew the road of change, equity, and justice was hard. That those promises were not guaranteed to all. A society is ever changing however, knowing that liberty and change originate from the people. And

it is to the people that power shall always reside. To me, King is one of the most American people if that ever was a category. King is not just a notable American, but to me, King is America.

To me, my passion is just not the right thing to do. Politics is literally life and death for many people. Silence on issues is compliance, and inaction results in unspeakable tragedy. It is through my studies, my reflection, and my ever burgeoning realization that is my reformation to ever continuous revolution of fighting for future generations. To utilize the privilege I have and throw myself into the movement for justice, liberty, democracy, dignity, and solidarity is what I must do, and what I implore more folks to do.

So, why do I act?

I act for my siblings one accident or emergency from going bankrupt.

I act for my siblings who haven't been to a doctor, or had medicine filled in several years because they cannot afford it.

I act for my siblings wanting to further themselves by higher education, trade, or vocational training but cannot because of the indebted expenses.

I act for my siblings who are scared of forming a union because of scabbing, union busting, unjust labor laws as well as labor standards, and fear tactics by employers.

I act for my transgender, intersex, and non-binary siblings that face discrimination and are murdered, brutalized, and ostracized for living authentically.

I act for my siblings of color who face innumerable waves of discrimination whether in the workplace, by the legal system, in voting, or are killed or imprisoned in acts of hate.

I act for my Indigenous siblings who were forced into assimilation, had their religion and culture outlawed, their languages banned, forced into confederation and reservation, had their children taken and placed in boarding schools, and lost many ancestors in the genocidal act that were the Indian Wars.

I act for my lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, and queer siblings that within the last decade only gained the right to marry but still face widespread discrimination and violence in housing, work, the public, adoption, and schooling.

I act for the survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse that aren't believed.

I act for my women siblings who face barriers in all aspects and who are constantly at risk of losing their agency.

I act for my working siblings terrified of losing their job, are extorted by unfair practices, are underpaid, and denied benefits.

I act for my religious minority siblings that fear practicing their faith in peace as anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of hate result in tragic, heinous acts of violence.

I act for my homeless siblings that are seen, ignored, stereotyped, and debated upon like second class citizens.

I act for my siblings with mental health issues that experience stigma, cannot afford or access care, and are excluded.

I act for my immigrant and refugee siblings, who are wrongfully barred, incarcerated, and interned with numerous atrocities from both their nation of origin and when they seek refuge or asylum here.

I act for my siblings that are victim of appalling foreign policy decisions, resulting in cataclysmic conflagrations of demolition upon people, land, and homes.

I act for my disabled, Deaf, hard of hearing, neurodiverse, and ailing siblings that cannot afford care, are stigmatized, overwritten as incapable, and lack accessibility to services as well as spaces.

I act for my age variant siblings, who are told they are too young to make a difference, too young to know anything or have opinions, too old to work, too old to learn, or too old to help.

I was raised by a single mother. We fled domestic violence, for a time we were homeless. I often didn't have lunch at school, and worked in the kitchen during middle school to get a meal. We live paycheck to paycheck, and my mom works a blue collar job as an equipment operator. We live in a two bedroom apartment, facing times of hardship every month. We balance the choice of repairing the car or buying groceries. If we can seek healthcare or pay the bills. This is the story of many of us.

I am a working class bisexual college student, and I'm proud of it. But do not confuse my hardship, or anyone else's, for a tale of nobility or inspiration. Certainly our experiences mold us. The goal, however, should be to eliminate these

barriers and uphold common cherished beliefs of what it means to be and live in these United States.

My drive is solidarity. My passion is righting the wrongs of systematic injustice and pervasive hate in all its forms. To look at history, and not venerate a time rife with inequities, but never forget, learn, and progress forward. To devote my time to making an impact. To plant seeds in a garden I will never see, yet know the blossoms bloom for future generations. Whether I run for office myself, vote for officials that I know are fluent in the people's issues they serve, or donate my time or resources to a cause, I am doing my part.

If there is one thing to which I ask you to depart with, whether it be your respective communities, or to the Halls of the People in Olympia, is this one simple request: Never forget who you serve. Think of how your vote, on a ballot or in a legislature, will impact the least among us. The most disenfranchised and underrepresented. Remain beholden to the people. Not capital, enrichment, establishment, or title. Do not lose sight of a better future, which is possible despite what pundits or naysayers decry. Forever shall my focus be to us, the people. And I ask the same of you.

When we pledge to stand in solidarity with someone who doesn't look like us, love like us, worship like us, work like us, or live like us, there is nothing too bold to accomplish. It is to this sentiment I bear faith, and to which I exude confidence that the world will be a better place.