

Diana Autin's Comments on Receiving the CADRE 2022 Keys to Access Award

Good afternoon. I am humbled and honored to accept the Keys to Access Award. Expanding access has been at the heart of everything I have done throughout my entire life. This award is particularly special because it comes from individuals and an organization I respect and with whom I have worked for so many years to reduce conflict, level the dispute resolution playing field, and create agreement.

I was so inspired by Jennifer Wolfsheimer's keynote yesterday. It was a powerful example of how vision, high expectations, and tenacity can overcome prejudice, low expectations, and inflexible systems. So much of what she said resonated with my own life experience. I did not have a physical, cognitive, or emotional disability, unless you consider these crooked fingers which I learned as an adult are considered "birth defects" due to too much inbreeding among my Cajun relatives to be a disability. But I was born with the disabilities of poverty, being a girl, and a loudmouth, having a Cajun and indigenous background, and being born to parents who, despite their own brilliance, did not have the opportunity for higher education. I, too, had to fight every step of the way to prove I belonged, whether it was in AP classes in HS – which I took only because the HS guidance counselor said, "You don't really want to take AP classes, do you? They're really hard" and this despite the fact that I was a straight A student – in college, at the University of Michigan Law School as the only Native American student, or at district, state, or national decision-making tables as a parent and representative of a family-led organization. When I look back it is surprising how often I did something just to show someone who thought I couldn't do it, that I could. I should actually thank that guidance counselor because taking those classes not only got me into University of Michigan undergrad but also saved me a semester of college because I received college credit for them!

Many of you are familiar with a famous song by Rogers and Hammerstein:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear,
You've got to be taught from year to year
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.

Thankfully, my parents taught me a different message, a different approach to life and the world. My parents were both born in Louisiana, as was I. My father was a Cajun from Bayou Lafourche ("you know why they call dat the bayou? Cuz everybody, dey live by you" – that's not really the reason; Bayou is a Houma Indian word for little river), my mother a woman with Sioux and Cherokee, Irish Catholic, Italian and German roots from New Orleans. My father spoke Cajun French until he started school at which point he was punished by having his hand whipped with a ruler whenever he spoke Cajun. Until the day he died, he was a different person, more alive, when he spoke Cajun. On a very personal level, I learned the importance of language access and how much language impacts how people approach and navigate the world. My father graduated

from high school and took a few business courses. My mother had to drop out of school in her early teens to work full time at a shrimp factory. After ten years of marriage and 5 children, my mother proudly received her GED. They were both committed to ensuring that their children would go to college, and they knew that we would have to be high achievers because we would need scholarships.

My mother also had a burning passion for justice. She grew up poor, with an alcoholic mother and an abusive father. She was proud of her Native American heritage and told me stories **of** and **from** her full-blooded grandmother. She experienced prejudice and knew that her potential was unrealized due to her life circumstances. But instead of making her bitter, it made her committed to making the world a better and more just place. From the time that I was little, she was a civil rights activist.

When I was 4 in New Orleans, she sent me to an integrated preschool. When we lived in North Carolina, and the public schools there were still not integrated, she and my father sent my sister and me to an integrated Catholic school in the next town over. They couldn't afford the tuition, so my mother did sewing and cleaning and my father did carpentry and plumbing and odd jobs. When we moved to San Pedro, California, she took me door knocking to get signatures on fair housing petitions before passage of the Civil Rights Act. During the Poor People's March on Washington in 1968 when we lived in Arlington, Virginia, she did laundry and cooked soup for the marchers. And when we moved to Ann Arbor Michigan, she was part of a group of activists who reviewed the history textbooks, wrote a report about the absence of women and indigenous people and people of color, and changed what was taught in the Ann Arbor Public Schools.

She was also a fierce advocate for her children in school. She demanded that we do well, that we show respect for our teachers and administrators, but if she felt we were being mistreated, she had no hesitation in going to the school to defend us. She was my first example of a parent advocate. Despite the fact that she worked outside our home, she was always involved in efforts to make our lives, our community, and our world a better place. She personified Marion Wright Edelman's saying that "Service is the rent we pay for living on this earth, for being. It is the very purpose of life." I watched and learned. And followed in her footsteps.

Given my parents' love of and respect for learning – we didn't have a lot, but we always had a library card! – it's not surprising that I grew up determined to be a teacher. I knew that, to my parents, becoming a teacher would be the pinnacle of success. I was the oldest of 5 children and since both my parents worked – my father often had 3 jobs – I had a lot of responsibility for my siblings. We would play "school," where I, of course, was the teacher. I taught my younger siblings to read before they ever started real school. I never imagined being anything but a teacher. I was even a Future Teacher of America as a freshman in high school!

In high school, I came into my own as an activist. With my husband, Keith Hefner, who is here today, and who I knew but didn't like in high school (to be honest, he didn't like me either), we helped create Students to Organize for Peace against the war in

Vietnam. I wrote an article about racism on the football team and promptly lost my HS newspaper editor-in-chief job after only one issue, which was confiscated leading to a demonstration and eventually to efforts to address racism in the school system. BTW, my future husband became the next editor of the paper. I ran for School Board as an 18-year old, was arrested with my sister for digging a bomb crater on the University of Michigan Diag (even though we politely rolled back the sod before digging!), and moved into a collective house where my future husband already lived. (The rest is history!) It was there that the idea originated for me to go to law school. I was smart, a big talker, and could probably get a scholarship (which I did).

In fact, I went to law school with a scholarship from the Law School Class of 1912 – all white men from privileged backgrounds. I still remember the ceremony when I was presented with the scholarship. That day was the first time the full name of the scholarship was revealed to me – the Law School Class of 1912 Scholarship for the Deserving Poor. I was so offended that I almost turned around and walked out. Instead I was comforted with the thought that they would be turning over in their graves to see the scholarship go to an indigenous, leftist woman, and walked proudly up to receive the scholarship, saying loudly, U of M is on Indian Land, and Vote Human Rights Party on Monday! My father followed proudly behind me.

From the beginning, I knew that I wanted to combine my love of teaching with the legal knowledge and skills I would develop in law school. As a history major in undergraduate school, I took seriously the words of James Madison, “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own government must arm themselves with the power that knowledge brings,” as well as those of Frederick Douglass, “If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the roar of its mighty waters... Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will.” I dedicated myself to arming people with the power that knowledge brings, and engaging in the struggle and agitation needed to make progress.

In law school, I helped to start an Unemployment Law Clinic that lasted until 2021 where we not only represented workers in unemployment claims but also trained workers in their rights.

From the time I graduated from University of Michigan Law School in 1977, at age 22, I have taught people who face unequal access and injustice to use the law to advocate for themselves and their communities. I was recruited out of law school to be a bus driver and Business Agent for the Transportation Employees Union, the first union in the country that negotiated protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation into the collective bargaining agreement. I taught bus drivers how to be stewards, represent workers in disputes, file grievances and unfair labor practice cases, and negotiate. When we moved to NYC 2 years later, I became a welfare rights organizer and taught women how to fight denials of their claims and to file requests for emergency resources. We succeeded in passing the first welfare rights increase in NYS

in almost a decade. After two years there, I became the Director of the Fund for Open Information and Accountability, and taught labor, civil rights, civil liberties, women's, gay, and other activists how to use the Freedom of Information Act to obtain government records they could use in their advocacy. And we succeeded in turning back the Reagan Administration's attempt to eviscerate the law. After two years there, I did my one and only stint in government, as the Deputy General Counsel and then General Counsel of the NYC Bureau of Labor Services, the City's equal employment contract compliance enforcement agency, protecting employees of city contractors against discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, marital status, age, religion, and sexual orientation. While I was there, I taught Labor Law, organizing and collective bargaining to trade union women as an adjunct at the Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations. I was at the Bureau for only two years when I left as a whistleblower (do you see a pattern here? Maybe my habit of leaving a job after 2 years stemmed from the fact that I never went to the same school more than 2 years in a row because we moved around a lot).

That is when I found my true passion, my people, my place. I became the Managing Attorney at Advocates for Children of NYC, a Parent Training and Information Center, and I have been in this movement for the past 35 years, 7 ½ years there and now 27 ½ years at SPAN as Executive Director or Executive Co-Director. In the intervening years, I have tried to use everything I learned about equity and inequity, justice and injustice, and inclusion and exclusion to enhance our organization's capacity to help build the knowledge and skills of parents and youth – and the professionals who serve them – to be able to more effectively navigate, advocate, and improve the systems, policies, procedures, and practices that impact them. That includes explicitly recruiting and promoting staff from diverse backgrounds, implementing leadership development programs that increase the number of educated, engaged, and effective parent leaders who sit at decision-making tables, especially those who face the greatest disparities in access and outcomes, and lifting up the voices of lived experience so that policymakers know what is really happening on the ground, how that is impacting the lives of the system's intended beneficiaries, and what is needed to improve access and outcomes.

SPAN now has 65 staff, a majority of whom first came to SPAN for help, became volunteers to help other parents, and then joined the staff. Over 60% are of color, and a third speak a language other than English (9 languages). We have staff who are LGBTQ+, who themselves have a disability; and who hold a variety of religious beliefs. We have staff who grew up poor, staff who didn't finish high school and staff with a law degree, and a growing handful of men!

Because of the diversity of our staff, we are better able to reach and serve families from a full range of backgrounds. I am so proud of our staff and the parent leaders with whom we work, and feel privileged every day that I have the opportunity to work with and learn from them.

Like Jennifer, I, too, am an inveterate list maker. So I'll share a list with a few lessons I have learned over a lifetime of advocacy. I call them the 10 "c's."

Be curious. Be curious about what is really happening on the ground, how parents and children from diverse backgrounds experience systems differently, the root causes, and what works to make things better.

Be courageous. Remember what Franklin D. Roosevelt said, that courage is not the absence of fear but rather the assessment that something else is more important. Despite my years of outspoken advocacy, I can still experience fear when raising my voice on an issue where our views are unpopular. But I speak up, because I know in my heart that telling the truth and working to improve systems is more important than my fear.

Be committed. Don't let obstacles – including fear - stand in the way of doing what you believe is right.

Be capable and a capacity-builder. Keep learning, keep growing, and build the capacity of those around you so that the next generation of leaders is nourished.

Be compassionate and caring. Compassion and caring go a long way in developing the trust and respect you need to get things done.

Be conscious. Be conscious of your own intentions, of your biases – both explicit and implicit - of how you are perceived by others, and of your impact.

Be culturally responsive and reciprocal. Be vulnerable. Share with others who you are and seek to learn about what works for others who are different from you. In seeking to reach, engage, and support families, be led by them.

Be collaborative and work to create agreement. Understand that you need to work with others to make the changes you want to see in your community, your state or territory, our country, and the world. Believe that most people you meet are well-intentioned, and that if you dig deep underneath surface positions, you will be able to find shared interests and partners to move the work forward.

And finally, **be a change agent.** Don't rest on your laurels, don't rely on others to get things done. Know that **we** are the ones we've been waiting for.

In closing, I want to thank CADRE for this incredible honor; my mother, who taught me that we all have a responsibility to make the world a better place; my father, who taught me the power of unconditional love; my husband, Keith Hefner, who has been my partner for 48 years, since we were 19; my children, one of whom, my daughter Emilia, is here today, who taught me about patience and perseverance and instilled in me a deep and abiding love I never could have imagined before becoming a parent; the SPAN staff, from whom I have learned so much and without whom I could have accomplished little, including Jeannette Mejias, Peg Kinsell, and Michele Tyler, who are at the conference with me; the parent centers and other family-led organizations around the country who so generously share their knowledge and expertise; our partners at

federal and state agencies and advocacy organizations, including SPAN's project officer for both our national and regional parent TA centers, Carmen Sanchez; and the families whose passion, commitment, and love for their children inspires me every day. Go forth into the world and speak up, take action, and create change. Thank you again.