

*Acceptance Speech of William C. Bell at the
2007 NASW Foundation Rhoda G. Sarnat Award,
April 22, 2008, Seattle, Washington*

Thank you Betsy, and NASW and the NASW Foundation for this honor.

I'm deeply humbled by this, and as I sat there listening to the introduction, I was touched that people would say some of those words about me, because, for me, all that I'm doing is living the life I believe that my mother taught me to live.

I didn't know that I was going to go there until I stood here, because I had taken that out of the speech. But my mom passed away at the end of 2005. From my perspective, she -- without the degree, with her fifth grade education -- had a level of compassion that has far exceeded anything that I've seen. And even though I went through high school and through college thinking that I was going to be a doctor; and even though in high school I took a college aptitude test that said to me you are best suited to be a social worker, I discounted that and sought to pursue what I think society has taught us is the place that we should go to practice our craft where we can have the most impact. But I've come to understand over the course of my life that impact comes from changing people's lives or creating a space for people's lives to change. That to me is social work.

To be singled out for something that clearly so many other people have made happen, and that I've been honored to be a part of -- the type of changes that have taken place throughout the course of my career -- is very humbling. But it's, I think, a path that when I found my way to New York City in the early 1980s -- having applied to medical school after finishing my undergraduate work and having been turned down for medical school after finishing my undergraduate work -- I think something was in the works saying you should have listened a few years earlier to the indicators.

But my first job in New York City was a caseworker, working in a foster care prevention program. It was there that I began to recognize what I believe is my life's calling. It's a calling that says that every child in this world, and especially every child in this rich nation we call America, deserves to have the opportunity to be parented effectively; that they deserve to be able to dream. They deserve to be able to explore and experience life uninhibited so that they can reach their full potential and that they can truly take the bar to the next level for the future generations to come. That desire is no different than the desire that I have for my own children, two of whom have already reached that magical landmark of 21 and one who is just about 15 months old. (Yes, I know you're saying, "You must be out of your mind.")

But last week, here in Seattle, we completed five days of an incredible experience with the Dalai Lama and with Archbishop Desmond Tutu. We spent time over the course of five days exploring this notion of compassion and exploring what it really means to express compassion. As we walked through that, the one thing that kept standing out to me was that compassion is far beyond just a concern for someone else's well-being; but the compassion can never come into existence until you add action to that concern. For me, it is the life of and, I think, the hope of every social worker who says that through my life, through my action, through my giving, through my existence in this world; the world will be made different for those whom I touch. And not only will the world be made different for those who I touch, but it will be made different for those who they touch; because what I'm giving is life's blood. What I'm giving is an opportunity for people to recognize the inherent quality that exists in all of us, which is to

change. That quality not only to change ourselves, but to change the world that we live in and leave our footprint or our fingerprint on life that says I came and I gave so that those who come after me can have more opportunity than I did.

There's an old Chinese proverb that says:

If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap.

If you want happiness for a day, go fishing.

If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune.

But if you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody.

I have been moved and motivated in my life by many great men and women who have come before me. But one that significantly stands out to me, maybe because his mother was named the same thing mine was – Alberta Williams – was Dr. King. He, with all that he did, had the essence of saying that if I can help somebody as I travel along, then my living will not be in vain.

When I think about this profession of social work, I think that it is time that we stand and take our rightful place among the world's professions. I think that it is time that we stand and recognize what I think Mrs. Sarnat recognized; which is that we are not bleeding heart do-gooders. It is true that we do good. It is true that sometimes our heart goes out for those for whom we are seeking to do good. But we are administrators, we are college presidents, we are educators, we are professionals in the health care arena, we are professionals in human services and child welfare, and we are politicians. We are elected officials – those who have been empowered to do the things that we've considered to be the broad perspectives of this field of social work, enhancing and enriching the quality of life – the essence of what we seek to do in alleviating the adverse social conditions that exist around us. But the thing that I believe will be the most powerful legacy that we will leave is promoting and ensuring and sustaining change through social justice.

For me, [it is good] to be here some 42 years after the creation of [Casey Family Programs] and to be in a position to embrace what I believe Mrs. Sarnat saw when she found her passion – found her passion in being a supporter of those who are in the social work education process; found her passion in saying that the public needs to understand who we are and that the public needs to be able to grasp what we ourselves need to grasp; that we can stand and be accounted for. Because what we are calling for in this society, in this world, is a group of people who will accept what I think is a great calling. A calling that says we must move to a place where every society can accept full responsibility for every one of its citizens, irrespective of that citizen's economic status; irrespective of that citizen's starting point in the world; irrespective of their family lineage. We all must accept what so many great people before us have said; and that is that we are connected to each other in a way that can never be broken no matter how much we may seek to deny it through our political platforms. No matter how much we may seek to deny it through funding cuts and diminishment of support for social work and those who are in the human services field. We must, as a nation -- if we are going to have a group of children who can go into adulthood and who can continue this conversation about social justice – we must recognize that my success can never be independent from your failure.

Casey Family Programs has taken the mantle to say that we want to influence change in the arena of child welfare. We have embarked upon a vision that we call our 2020 Strategy for children. And this is but one area -- one example -- of where social work makes a difference in the world. We have concluded that there are too many children in the foster care system in this country. We refuse to believe that a country that is able to put men and women on the moon and allow them to live in space

for extended periods of time, that that nation does not have the innovation and the capacity to care for a half-million of its most vulnerable children. We believe that the issue here is commitment and leadership. We have taken to task to say that there is a cost to our inaction. We are seeking to cut the foster care system in half by the year 2020. Not that we will do it, but we will influence that occurrence across the country.

And we will do that through three main efforts. One is our direct services where we will demonstrate how quality practice can be done. We will do so not because we have this enriched budget capacity from Casey Family Programs, but we will do so in a way that is affordable by any jurisdiction that seeks to do it.

The second route will be through public policy. We have to change the public discourse about vulnerable children and families. We have to begin to create measuring tools that really speak to how movement occurs. The question that we seek to ask of jurisdictions will not be when will you get to 50 percent reduction, but how do you know that you are moving in that direction. And what is your answer to questions like, what is the salary of your social workers over the last five years. And has that salary gone up or down in that window? Because if it has not moved, then you're probably not headed in the right direction. What is the workload of your social workers over the last five years? If that workload has gone up as opposed to coming down and being more manageable, then you're probably not moving in the direction of the outcomes that you seek. How many directors or commissioners have you had in the last five years? If you've had two or three in a five-year window, than you're probably not moving in the right direction with respect to where your system is going.

What we have to begin to do, as we take this platform as social workers, is ask the hard questions. Ask the questions of ourselves. Why am I doing this? Why am I in this place? What will be my footprint when I move away? After we've had that introspection within ourselves, ask those who are with us: am I dictating the direction for the families that I serve? Or, am I engaging them in creating their own future? And asking the jurisdictions: are you willing to put the political will behind what you say is truly important to you? I think that's the question that we have to even ask ourselves. Are we willing to put our own will behind bringing into existence that change that we all desire, no matter how much it costs? And do we do that in workforce development? Do we step up and say, yes, there may be 600,000 social workers, but the need is far greater than that? Do we do that by standing up and saying to our universities that you need to continuously innovate in your curriculum and understand whether or not what you are teaching and what you are giving – whether or not it is preparing the workforce for what they're going to deal with when they step out into the world. We have to push ourselves to never believe that we have arrived, but that every day is an opportunity to become.

I thank you for joining here with us tonight. I thank you NASW and NASW Foundation for believing that what I've been a part of is worthy of acknowledgement. And I thank you for continuing this walk -- this walk that says the world will be different, and it will be different because I'm a part of it.

Thank you and God bless you.