

2014 Evangelina Menendez Trailblazer Awards

Remarks by Senator Robert Menendez
Saint Peter's University, New Jersey – March 30, 2014

Thank you very much, and welcome to the Evangelina Menendez Women of Distinction Trailblazer Awards for 2014. Let me extend a very special thank-you to Meryl Frank for serving as our MC today. Meryl is a woman of distinction in her own right, an advisor on women's issues to President Clinton, a former New Jersey mayor, President Obama's appointee as Ambassador to the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 2009 and according to the Jerusalem Post one of the 50 most influential Jewish women in the world for her work on behalf of women. Thank you, Meryl for agreeing to MC our event.

To Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, thank you for taking the time from her very busy schedule to be our keynote speaker. Ambassador Power is one of America's most accomplished diplomats, a leading voice for the rights of women and for humanitarian efforts around the world and we look forward to hearing what she has to say. Thank you, Ambassador.

Let me also thank the President of St. Peter's University, Dr. Eugene Cornacchia, for his educational and administrative leadership here at St. Peter's and for his hospitality today. Thank you, Gene.

And since tomorrow is the deadline to enroll in health care we're happy to have members of the Urban League of Hudson County and the Jersey City Health Department here to help anyone who wishes to enroll in health care before the deadline. Sign up today.

And of course last but by no means least the reasons we are all here. Let me recognize this year's 6 extraordinary honorees. Each of them has made New Jersey a better place to live and raise a family. Each is truly a trailblazer and a woman of great distinction who has lived up to my mother's example, for whom I named these awards.

My mother was a seamstress in the textile factories of Northern New Jersey a loving, hard-working, quiet leader in her own right, leading the family showing my sister Caridad and I the way. Caridad is here today. She was our mother's primary caretaker for the last few years of her life and was the one who kept her comfortable and peaceful at night in her last days. Caridad, please stand and be recognized.

My parents moved to the United States from Cuba in 1953. My mother was the driving force behind that decision. She did not want to live under the right-wing dictator, General Fulgencio Batista, who had been in power for 20 years at that time. She would later tell me she sensed danger and instability in the air. At the time, a 27 year old law school graduate, Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz, led a rebel attack on the Cuban Army base at Moncado, killing a number of soldiers.

Cuba was on the verge of revolution, and my mother dreamed of nothing more than the safety and stability of her family. She made a momentous decision. She decided to leave her home and create a new future for her family in the United States.

I realize now that it was an extraordinarily difficult decision for anyone to make, one that clearly in my mind makes her a trailblazer who embodies the qualities we celebrate in these awards, quiet strength, wisdom, a belief in yourself, and the courage to do what you believe will make a difference in the lives of the people you love.

Later in life she told me: *"I didn't want my children growing up under those circumstances."* So, in the fall of 1953, the family arrived in New York City, my mother pregnant with her third child, me. And the only reason I'm standing here today, one of one hundred United States Senators, is because my mother had a deep reservoir of quiet strength, the wisdom to realize what she had to do, the courage to do it, and a belief in herself that she was doing what was right for her family.

If that is not the definition of a trailblazer, I don't know what is. She was my trailblazer, and every day she is beloved and deeply missed. In her honor today we congratulate these 6 New Jersey women, Kathleen Assini, New Jersey's teacher of the year, Laurel Brennan, Secretary Treasurer of the AFL-CIO, Danielle Gletow, founder and CEO of One Simple Wish, Amy Mansue, President and CEO of Children's Specialized Hospital, Aida Marcial, Founder and President of Global Justice Investigations, and Janet Mino, a special education and autism teacher at John F. Kennedy High School.

I know my mother would be very proud of each of our honorees and would probably say, *"Échale ganas! Haz tu mejor esfuerzo! Y sigan su buen trabajo!"* : "Do good! Do your best! and keep up the good work!"

When we talk about trailblazers, I don't think anyone in this room would hesitate to mention former First Lady and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton who once summed up the importance of the world's women as succinctly and unambiguously as anyone could.

She said, *"The status of the world's women is not only a matter of morality and justice. It is also a political, economic, and social imperative. Put simply, the world cannot make lasting progress if women and girls in the 21st century are denied their rights and left behind."* She was right. The world cannot make real progress if women are left behind.

But in too many places, women are producing 70 percent of the food, but earning only ten percent of the income, and own only one percent of the land. In too many places women are banned from participating in national governments, village councils, and peace negotiations. In too many places girls are prevented from attending school, and now a majority of the world's illiterate people are women. In too many places, women and girls are attacked as a deliberate and coordinated strategy of armed conflict and rape is used as a weapon of war.

And yet, there is also good news. In Uganda, a robust women's movement began a tireless campaign to ensure that women were protected in the tenure, ownership and administration of land. In Afghanistan, life expectancy for women has risen in just ten years from just 44 years of age to 62. Ten years ago, almost no girls went to school. Today, 3 million are in school and make up 40 percent of all primary school enrollments. Nearly 120,000 Afghan girls have graduated from high school. 15,000 are enrolled in universities, and nearly 500 women are on university faculties.

Maternal mortality, infant mortality, under-five mortality rates have all declined significantly. Globally, over the last twenty years, maternal mortality fell by 47 percent and global fertility rates fell by 23 percent, reflecting rising education, life expectancy, and access to contraception.

Despite comprising over 50 percent of the world's population, women continue to be underrepresented in every aspect of political and public life. Today, only 21 percent of the world's parliamentarians are women. There are only 21 women either serving as head of state or head of government. Only 17 percent of government ministers are women, with the majority serving in the fields of education and health. Since 1992, women have represented fewer than 3 percent of mediators and 8 percent of negotiators to major peace processes.

These numbers are far too small. These are the places where decisions get made, and simply put, there aren't enough women in decision making roles. But when there are, we make progress. An Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development study of 19 countries found that when countries had an increase in the number of women legislators, there was an increase in funds spent on education.

In India, research showed that West Bengal villages with greater representation of women in local councils saw an investment in drinking water facilities double that of villages with fewer women on local councils. In the United States, women-owned businesses contribute nearly \$3 trillion to our economy, and they are growing at more than double the rate of all firms. And if these trends hold, women entrepreneurs will generate more than 5 million jobs over the next six years. The world needs women in leadership roles, and – here in New Jersey – we celebrate six of them today.

As Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I have learned, as I'm sure Ambassador Power knows well, as technology makes the world smaller and brings us closer whatever happens anywhere in the world instantly has an impact everywhere in the world. The suffering we see from a chemical attack in Syria sends ripples across the planet and we feel it here in New Jersey.

We begin to realize that as the digital age has made the world smaller. It has also brought the world community closer. When one girl in Pakistan is shot because she believes girls need an education, we all feel her pain and stand with her, and together we can change the world.

This year, in July, we were all moved by the words of Malala Yousafzai, who was shot in the head by the Taliban for promoting education to girls in Pakistan. She said of the shooting in her now famous speech just across the river at the United Nations: *"It was not my day, but the day of every woman, every boy, every girl who have raised their voices for their rights."*

She said she wants education for every child, including the sons and daughters of the Taliban and terrorists saying: *"Let us pick up our books and our pens. They are our most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world."* And her words were heard around the world. Our 6 honorees are our hope for building a better New Jersey, and with young women like Malala are our hope for a better world.

I know what my mother would have said to Malala and to all of us who believe as Hillary Clinton said that the *status of the world's women is not only a matter of morality and justice. It is also a political, economic, and social imperative*: “*Échale ganas! Haz tu mejor esfuerzo! Y sigan su buen trabajo!*” Do good! Do your best! And keep up the good work!

Thank you all very much and congratulations to all of our honorees.

Ambassador Power

Now, it gives me great pleasure to introduce our keynote speaker. As I said in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during the hearing on the nomination of Ambassador Power, she comes to the task with much fanfare and with some criticism, which at the end of the day means she must be doing something right. But no one has every questioned her considerable credentials or her years of service or her willingness to speak her mind especially when it comes to human rights, the treatment of women, and humanitarian efforts around the world. As a war correspondent in Bosnia, in the former Yugoslavia, in Rwanda and Sudan as she said in her Pulitzer Prize winning book: *A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide* – she has seen “*evil at its worst.*”

Ambassador Power has built a career and a reputation as one of this nation's most principled voices against all human rights violations and crimes against humanity – and I now her voice is being heard around the world. In her role at the National Security Council, she was closely involved with U.S. policy toward the UN. She knows the UN's strengths, its weaknesses, and how it operates. At the end of the day, the United States needs a representative at the UN who will uphold U.S. values, promote human rights, secure our interests, and the interests of our allies around the world.

The woman for whom these awards are named today was a Cuban immigrant. She bore witness to those who suffered under the Castro regime's oppression, and, when I met with Ambassador Power before her confirmation I was pleased to hear that she is committed to exposing the Castro dictatorship's total disregard for human and civil rights, and I know she will follow through on that commitment.

She believes that we can never lose sight of these moral issues, never lose sight of our values and democratic ideals especially as we address the pressing diplomatic, economic, and security issues that confront our nation. In the words of the UN Preamble, the United Nations was created “*to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small...*”

Who better than Samantha Power, a recognized advocate for the fundamental rights of every human being to be our Ambassador to the United Nations, someone so engaged in progress on human rights around the world; on freedom of expression in Latin America; fighting HIV/AIDS, malaria and polio in Africa; on the status of talks to resolve the 66 yearlong question of Cyprus; on women's rights in Pakistan; labor rights in Bangladesh, and human rights in Sri Lanka. She is our voice on Syria, Ukraine, and Iran. She is an Ambassador's ambassador.

She is the voice of America's interests in fulfilling the stated purpose of the UN – “*to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security.*”

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Ambassador Samantha Power.

Kathleen Assini

Now I would like to welcome my son, Rob, to the stage. Each year Rob has helped me present these awards in honor of his grandmother, and it is our privilege to continue that tradition. Rob, please join me.

It is now our pleasure to present the Evangelina Menendez Trailblazer Awards to New Jersey's 2014 Women of Distinction.

The first honoree is Kathleen Assini. Kathleen is New Jersey's teacher of the year, chosen in a statewide competition as the outstanding teacher to represent all of New Jersey's teachers. There is hardly anything else one has to say about Kathleen than that.

I remember my teacher of the year to this day, Miss Gail Harper, and she had an extraordinary impact on my life as I'm sure Kathleen has had on all of her students. She teaches social studies to special education students and to general education and honor students at Delsea Regional Middle School in Franklinville. She serves on the New Jersey Teacher Advisory Panel and is an advisor to the Natural Helpers, Peer Mediators, and the History Club. She sits on the Faculty Council, Grading Committee, and Technology Committee and work on drug awareness community outreach. She is truly a mentor to her students.

Education is a second career for Kathleen, but she has excelled and has become a trailblazer in always striving for more in her life and instilling that belief in her students. In becoming a teacher, she has given back so much to the community and has proven to all of her students what my mother told me, that education is the key that unlocks the door. We honor her today for living up to that legacy.

Kathleen, it's an honor for my son and I to present you with the Evangelina Menendez Trailblazer Award for 2014

Laurel Brennan

Our next recipient is Laurel Brennan. Laurel is a trailblazing labor leader, the first woman to serve as Secretary-Treasurer of the New Jersey State AFL-CIO developing and implementing policies that have a dramatic positive impact on the lives of one million union members and their families. She was also the first woman elected as Secretary-Treasurer of the Southern New Jersey Central Labor Council and is a member of the National Executive Board of the Coalition of Labor Union Women and a Trustee of the non-partisan Working Families United for New Jersey.

Among her many other accomplishments Laurel can take full credit for being the person who created the New Jersey State AFL-CIO Annual Women in Leadership Development Conference – focusing on how women can help unions and unions can help women. She has been a trailblazer for workers and for women throughout her career, and Rob and I are honored to present you with the 2014 Evangelina Menendez Trailblazer Award.

Danielle Gletow

Our next honoree is Danielle Gletow, a foster parent who founded an organization called One Simple Wish. Danielle was deservedly named a top ten CNN Hero in 2013 for her work as a champion of children. She certainly is a New Jersey hero and an example to all of us. When she was named a CNN Hero, she put it very simply but very powerfully: *"I'm here to be the mom to all the kids who might not feel they have one."* They certainly have that mom now.

Danielle has blazed a trail for all those vulnerable children and families who too often have to overcome heartbreak, the pain of loss, and the suffering of loneliness. Danielle would not sit idly by. She wanted to do something for them so she created One Simple Wish from her one wish to make life better for them by granting them one personal wish online.

As of today, she has granted 6,500 wishes to foster children and vulnerable families and has created a network of 500 Social Service Agencies in 42 states. Danielle, you deserve all of the national acclaim you have received and today Rob and I are pleased to present you with the 2014 Evangelina Menendez Trailblazer Award.

Amy Mansue

Our next honoree is the President and Chief Executive Officer of Children's Specialized Hospital. This is not her first honor this year. She has also been selected as one of New Jersey's 2014 Best 50 Women in Business by *NJBiz* and a top 10 health care policy analyst and expert by *NJ Spotlight*. Amy is one of the nation's leading social services and healthcare executives. She is someone who has blazed her own trail in her own way – on the issues she cares about.

That trail has led from her social service classrooms at the University of Alabama to the Boardrooms of the New Jersey Chamber, Rutgers University, the New Brunswick Development Corporation, the Middlesex Water Company, and the Children's Hospital Association.

She is a trailblazing social service and healthcare professional – cracking that glass ceiling by working on the issues she loves and making a difference in and for the community while doing it. She is the personification of the importance of diversity in our corporate structure and is leading the way not only as President and CEO of Children's Specialized Hospital, but as a role model for the next generation of women leaders in New Jersey.

Amy, it's a pleasure for Rob and I to present you with the 2014 Evangelina Menendez Trailblazer Award.

Aida Marcial

Our next award recipient is an international investigator of child abuse and human trafficking. She is the founder and President of Global Justice Investigations, a faith-based company working globally to protect children. She was a Camden County prosecutor for 23 years and is now blazing a trail around the world for all those who want to find a way to stop the abuse of children.

As Commander of the Camden County Child Abuse Unit, Aida was a real life Law-and-Order-Special-Victims-Unit investigator. She is also co-founder of “Toys for Tears,” a charitable organization providing stuffed animals in every police, fire, and EMT vehicle in South Jersey.

Aida is truly a trailblazer for the protection of children, and Rob and I are pleased to present you with the 2014 Evangelina Menendez Trailblazer Award.

Janet Mino

Our next nominee is a woman who has blazed a trail for every special needs child she has taught. You may recognize her as the teacher in the incredible film, *Best Kept Secret*, that has been shown on PBS, at a special Congressional screening in Washington, and at film festivals throughout the northeast. I think we can say that Janet Mino’s dedication to her students is a secret no more!

The film is a call to action for all of us, and Janet Mino and her students have opened our eyes to the challenges children with autism face as their graduate from high school. The film has shown us just how much Janet has done to make the lives of her students better, easier, and more productive in and out of school. She has improved programs and provided more educational opportunities for students with autism and has helped their families realize the contributions children with autism can make to the community. She has been recognized on two occasions by the Newark Board of Education and School Superintendent for her “unparalleled resilience and thoughtful academic programs.”

If you have not seen *Best Kept Secret*, you should. It introduces us to this incredible teacher, and it opens our eyes and our hearts to those families of children on the autism spectrum. Janet is a trailblazer who is deserving of recognition for the work she has done and the difference she has made in the lives of so many.

She is truly a woman of distinction and Rob and I are honored to present her with the 2014 Evangelina Menendez Trailblazer Award.

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