

# Remarks of Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner

## Profile in Courage Awards May 12, 2008

*As Prepared for Delivery*

Members of the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award Committee; U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy; Caroline Kennedy and members of the Kennedy family; Secretary of State Bowen; Governor Winter; Laura Schapiro; members of my family; dear friends and fellow Ohioans; distinguished guests and ladies and gentlemen:

Thank you. I am honored and humbled to receive this significant and meaningful award today. It is with gratefulness that I stand before you, trying to take in the austerity of this occasion—trying to comprehend that from difficult work often filled with emotionally charged controversy and strife, can emerge honor and dignity in the attempt to move forward the human causes of fairness, equality and respect.

I am quietly amazed that the simplicity of my work—ensuring the right to vote in a system that is free, fair, open and honest—is recognized as being among those whose legacies in courage reach beyond their time and well beyond their lives.

It is significant that this award is one so wholeheartedly supported by the family of President John F. Kennedy. For it is in a family that one gains support, values and the inspiration to go beyond that family and see the needs of others in the world and to public service.

As in many endeavors in life, it is difficult for one person to go it alone. I am blessed to have a wonderful and supportive family, including my husband, Rick, who is my soul mate and who, in encouraging me to follow my convictions, has been a steady source of strength and advice with each step taken. My grown children—Kate, Laura and John—have sacrificed much in the endeavor of public service, often not being able to get through to their mom on the first try, and during the campaign, putting on hold jobs and school to help win the election.

I am blessed with some of the most talented and hard working staff in Ohio's state government and by the friendship and support shown to me today by the many other family members and friends here to share in this ceremony. All of you have my profound thanks and deepest respect.

I began my public service twenty-five years ago working as an entry-level attorney in the Ohio Secretary of State's office. I liked helping people and got a taste of making a difference when later in that office I worked on legislative changes to Ohio's election laws. As the years progressed and I saw legislatures change, new agendas forged, and wholesale changes in my state's political and economic culture, I realized that making a difference is more than a young person's dream of leaving your mark.

Since being elected to public office, first as a judge and now as Ohio's Secretary of State, I have come to humbly realize that making a difference is simply this: showing compassion in what you do, working to alleviate suffering, and championing the causes of fairness, equality and respect among citizens—and in doing this, never giving up.

The weekend before I learned of this award, I had been searching the literature for some uplifting thoughts that would help my staff in its resolve to keep working for improvements to Ohio's elections and voting systems. At the time we were experiencing a barrage of criticism instigated by partisans and election officials who disagreed with our conclusions and approaches.

In my search I came across a 1991 book given to me by my sister, Andrea, edited by Peter Beard called, *Longing for Darkness*. The book contains writings and other mementos from the life of Kamante, the well-loved servant of writer Isak Dinesen, who wrote the book, *Out of Africa*. The last page of Kamante's book is a letter from Jacqueline Kennedy to Kamante written in her own handwriting and near the time that Dinesen died in 1962. In that letter she spoke to Kamante of the young people of the 1960's who were fighting for civil rights. She said, "They had allies in an earlier time, who knew that courage was endurance as well as abandon."

I then understood that endurance is the mortar that holds together the bricks of courage. It also illustrated that those who hold elected office must endeavor with endurance to better the lives of the people they serve, even if it can only be for the time they are in office. I have come to learn that this is enough to make a difference.

I come from the State of Ohio, whose history is mired in political traditions and machinations with a claim of 8 of the nation's 43 presidents. Since Ohio's statehood in 1803, many of the state's citizens have served as presidential cabinet members whose activities have helped shape this country throughout its history. Ohio has been a state that is critical to the direction of the leadership of our country.

In the last presidential election, Ohio supplied the needed electoral votes for our current president's victory. Many have questioned the efficacy of our last presidential election in Ohio. I simply questioned its fairness of process.

It pained me to see the representation of my state in 2004 with long lines at polling places, accusations of unequal distribution of voting machines in some counties, and certainly by many that Ohio's election was stolen or tainted. I love my state, and I love my country. Whether or not this characterization of Ohio's 2004 presidential election is accurate, I see it as my challenge to change Ohio's elections to instill voter confidence. Voter confidence in Ohio's elections does not stop with its electorate—I knew from the national interest in my own election in 2006 that

what happened in Ohio mattered to the country.

As I traveled Ohio during the campaign, I was often asked questions about the latest voting technology and whether it was secure and could be trusted. I promised to conduct a thorough review of Ohio's voting systems and undertook that task in my first year in office.

Debra Bowen, my sister Secretary of State in California, had many of the same concerns and began a similar process in her state. Secretary Bowen and I kept in contact in undertaking our studies. I saw the barrage of criticism she endured upon the release of her study's findings and upon her subsequent decertification of touch-screen voting machines. My staff and I added a dimension to Ohio's study that would include election officials' procedures that might mitigate the risks her study identified. I had hoped that our study would yield more encouraging results. It did not.

Despite including election officials in our process, Ohio's study was met with a combination of stunned reactions and then angry claims of irresponsibility for undermining confidence in Ohio's elections at a time when my stated goal was to restore and ensure voter confidence. I likened the need to the study to the need for taking a test to see if one has a deadly disease. It's better to know what you're dealing with.

During the study, I told election officials that based on the timing of the study's results, we could not make wholesale changes in voting equipment for Ohio's March 4 primary election. I told them backup paper ballots would be needed in the 53 counties utilizing the riskiest machines—touchscreen voting machines. I could see their look of dread, and they asked me the question: "Are you going to make us ask voters the question: 'paper or plastic?'" I asked them what was their preference, and they said, "Please don't make us ask."

In President Kennedy's book, *Profiles in Courage*, he acknowledged that sometimes courage calls for compromise. I acceded to their wishes, issuing a simple one-page directive on January 2, 2008, that backup paper ballots be printed and made available at polling places in the minimum amount of 10% of the ballots cast in a similar, previous election. I did not make them ask the question of every voter as to their preference for a paper ballot. I continued to push the need for new voting systems in Ohio that utilized optical scan paper ballots, and I continued to meet derision by some and cheers by others.

The furor raised over the simple directive for backup paper ballots resulted in two lawsuits, scoffing criticism from some election officials and editorial boards, and after the election, howls about government waste and unnecessary cost. When the eyes of the country were on Ohio on March 4, the unexpected occurred: bomb threats in 2 counties, flooding in 10 counties preventing access to polling places, ice storms in numerous other counties with resulting power outages, and mis-programmed touchscreen voting machines in one county. Backup paper ballots allowed a record turnout of Ohio voters to vote in an historic presidential primary despite weather calamity, human error and a lack of power to operate voting machines. Some called it a waste—we call it a "best practice" that allows every eligible person to vote, no matter the obstacles.

After the election, criticisms continued because not all paper ballots had been used. I responded using the analogy that the backup paper ballots were like the spare tire we're so glad we have when stranded on that remote country road with a flat tire on our car.

I continue the fight to move my state to a more secure and reliable system of voting. I will continue the use of backup paper ballots, post-election audits and other security measures to ensure the enfranchisement and confidence of every eligible Ohioan—and to ensure the nation's confidence in Ohio elections.

Change can be hard, even when it's necessary and warranted. Leadership toward needed change requires vision. My vision is a simple one of elections that encourage confidence, participation and an informed citizenry who truly supplies the voice for its government toward a world of fairness, equality and respect.

I am grateful to the JFK Library Foundation and to the Kennedy family for recognizing my work and the work of those whose lives are dedicated to public service. I hope that through the work of the foundation many young people will answer the call of public service in furtherance of the human causes that make all our lives better.

I will take this honor back to my state, one so deserving of a change for the better in the eyes of the nation. And I will continue to work tirelessly in these efforts. Thank you again and God bless each and every one of you.