

Claudia Lennhoff: Closing Remarks 2014

I hope you enjoyed the dinner, the awards presentation, and the slide show.

Once again, I want to thank all of you for not only being here tonight, but for being part of Health Care Consumers and all the different struggles and efforts to make our community better and stronger.

We have many challenges ahead – the ongoing implementation of the Affordable Care Act and getting our community members covered; making sure that Frances Nelson Health Center continues on its path to being a strong, vibrant and sustainable health center where anyone can go to receive excellent health and dental care, the struggle of the 5th & Hill residents to get the toxic contamination in their neighborhood cleaned up, and the fight to protect the Mahomet Aquifer from contamination from PCB's and Manufactured Gas Plant waste.

And let's not forget that we are in an election year. We have to pay special attention to candidates and what they stand for because so much of what we hold dear and the social programs that have improved our lives and the lives of our families are up for grabs – Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and the Affordable Care Act.

But before we look ahead, let's look at where we are right now, because I don't think we want to miss this moment.

Last year, in my closing remarks, looking ahead, I had this to say:

"We want to seize the opportunity of the full implementation of the Affordable Care Act, and we want to enroll thousands of our

uninsured or underinsured and struggling community members in new affordable health insurance and Medicaid starting this October.

I can't wait for the moment that we get to start helping people get health insurance! I can't wait for the moment that we get to start bringing people in from out of the cold, and giving them a real passport to health care.

I know it won't be perfect, and I know there will be problems along the way, but I want to wrestle with those problems and work to make it better! That is so much more preferable than what we have had. Health reform and the phase that is about to begin in October, when people can start applying for health insurance and Medicaid through the Health Insurance Marketplace, is the biggest social reform our country has had in 40 years. It's not perfect, but it's a huge advance and it will save the health and the lives of millions of people."

And now we are here, in this important historical moment, when a major new social program has been created. We are standing inside history. We are helping to make history.

But being inside history means that we can lose the forest for the trees, as we focus on all the nuts and bolts and the problems and the bumps along the road.

I want to step back for a moment and bring some perspective to this historical moment in time when the Affordable Care Act is being brought to life.

I want to start by saying that health insurance saves lives. It doesn't matter whether it is Medicaid or private health insurance. Health insurance saves lives. Years ago, the Robert Wood Johnson

Foundation commissioned a huge study by the Institutes of Medicine and the IOM found what we have always known: people who don't have health insurance die younger. They live sicker and they suffer more, and they die earlier from preventable and treatable diseases.

Health insurance is not health care, but it makes health care possible. It is like a passport to care.

I want to share a personal story to make a larger point. I want to talk about luck.

Last year, about this time, just before our Annual Dinner, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Thyroid cancer is supposed to be a "good kind of cancer" to have – slow-growing and non-lethal.

Well, as luck would have it, my thyroid cancer actually turned out to be the rarest and most aggressive form of thyroid cancer there is – in the universe! It is so rare that if you search the web for literature on it, you only find a few case studies. Almost all of the case studies show that patients with this cancer typically die within about 7 to 10 months of diagnosis. Just my luck.

But I'm still here. Let me tell you about how I came to be diagnosed and why I'm still here.

It's really quite simple. I got diagnosed because I had an annual primary care appointment. During the visit, after my exam, my doctor asked me if there was anything else I wanted to talk about or if there was anything at all bothering me. I mentioned the feeling of fullness in my throat and the need to constantly clear my throat. Identifying what was causing those problems is what led to my diagnosis.

Those symptoms alone would not have been enough to make me seek out medical care. In fact, I didn't seek out medical care for those annoying symptoms. I just thought that maybe it was allergies and weight gain – annoying little facts of life. But because I had an annual primary care visit, I was diagnosed.

I can tell you first hand that the only reason that I have been receiving annual primary care visits is because I have health insurance. If I did not have health insurance, I would do what most uninsured Americans do: I would only have sought out medical care when I was really sick or my symptoms became really bothersome.

If that had been the case for me, I might not have lived to see the end of this year. I probably would not be standing before you tonight, celebrating with you.

When I finally learned about the type of cancer that I had, I will admit that I was terrified. Who wouldn't be? But because I was fortunate enough to have health insurance, I never once worried about whether I would be able to get the health care that I needed – the care that would give me a fighting chance. I cannot imagine living with the fear of not knowing if I would be able to get the care I needed. Health insurance gave me peace of mind when I needed it most.

I was fortunate to be diagnosed early and to have a fighting chance. I was fortunate to have health insurance because I have a job that provided it.

But here is the point of my personal story – it was the luck of the draw that I got this nasty cancer; it was good fortune that I had a

job that provided health insurance; and health insurance, which gave me access to primary care, saved my life and gave me peace of mind.

We never know, do we, what life will throw at us?

Illness, injury, and disability are all too often the luck of the draw.

But it shouldn't be a matter of luck to have health insurance.

Everyone deserves a fair shot at being able to deal with whatever health-related luck comes to their way.

And that is why health insurance is so important, and why this moment in time when we are implementing the Affordable Care Act, is so important and so enormous.

There are plenty of valid critiques and problems, sure. But we can make improvements, and we will. The fact of the matter is that, because of the Affordable Care Act and through our work, we are bringing people in from out of the cold, and giving them a real passport to health care, and a fighting chance for better health.

Some things just shouldn't be left to luck. Some things are important enough to fight for and to protect.

It shouldn't be a matter of luck whether you have to live with toxic chemicals in the soil and groundwater in your neighborhood. It shouldn't be a matter of luck that your drinking water from the Mahomet Aquifer might be forever poisoned because of human action and inaction. It shouldn't be a matter of luck to have health insurance and access to primary and preventive care. These things should not be a matter of luck.

Someone once said, “the only thing that overcomes hard luck is hard work.” So those are our marching orders.

We have to work hard to get everyone covered and to improve our local and national health care system. We have to work hard to protect the Mahomet Aquifer and the 5th & Hill Neighborhood. We have to work hard to be smart about the elections and vote for candidates who will protect and improve the social programs that we care about. But that is what we do best together – we work hard, so that we can make a difference.

Continuing the work requires all kinds of support and involvement. So, please stick with us and help us get the work done and help us keep going. Together, we will go far.

Now, as I’m wrapping up, I want to make a special appeal to those of you who can, to consider making a special contribution to our William Mueller Sustaining Fund.

Bill loved CCHCC deeply and was always looking ahead and concerned about our financial future so we could be around for a long time to continue the work that matters. Please consider making a contribution in honor of Bill and in support of our organization.

And please continue to do all the things that you do, big and small, that help make our organization and our community better.

From the bottom of my heart, I thank all of you for your good works and for your support, and I look forward to the next 12 months, and many more years together, improving the health of our community! Thank you!