

Claudia Lennhoff: Closing Remarks 2019

Good evening again.

I hope you all enjoyed the awards presentations, and the slide show this evening.

Thank you all for being here for this celebration of our 42nd year, and congratulations and thank you to the award recipients.

I am so moved by the power represented in this room tonight. We are a room full of everyday ordinary people who have, in our various ways, dedicated ourselves to something greater, something outside of what is needed for us to get through our daily lives. In some form or another, every one of you here tonight has dedicated some portion of your lives – some time and some energy – to fighting for justice and working to improve the lives of others.

I see this dedication every day in the work that we do – through our campaigns and task forces and our volunteers and interns. But at an event like this, where we can gather ourselves, where we can stop and reflect and celebrate, this dedication to work for something greater – to work for justice and to work to improve the lives of others - is undeniably and brilliantly clear, and I love this.

If these past 12 months have taught us anything it is that our democracy is a living breathing thing. It is both strong and fragile at the same time. We have to take care of it every single day. And just like the programs, policies, laws and rights we care about – whether Medicare, Social Security, Medicaid, Food Stamps, just and humane immigration policies, civil rights – we can never assume it is established and safe from harm. We have to protect it, always. We have to involve ourselves with it, because if we don't, who will? And to what effect?

Our democracy is us.

The recent 2018 elections, which created a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives, was a so-called blue wave – but that blue wave was the result of a health care wave.

All across the country, voters and candidates mobilized to fight for and protect health care, among many other issues.

It was really amazing and gratifying.

But the part that saddens me a bit is that it took so long – that it took the people of our nation so long to see that every victory for justice, for the health of the people, for civil rights, for decency – is at stake and has to be cherished and protected and fought for.

It took so long for people to see that policy-making – whether to build and create something or to destroy it – is a human activity, led by elected officials and the people they place in government jobs.

If we didn't know it before, we certainly know it now: elections have consequences. They have consequences on the laws and policies that make us better, healthier, and that protect our planet and our environments. They have consequences on our rights and on our civic decency.

We cannot take anything for granted because there are those in government right now, and those who support them, who seek to bankrupt the programs – all of the programs – that improve people's lives and protect us the most when we are vulnerable whether by virtue of illness or poverty.

There are those who want to roll back protections and decency because they think they can make money from it – money for themselves and their rich cronies.

And there are those who seek to do the same – not because they seek to make money, but because they are hateful of other people – they detest that others – whether they be brown or black skinned, whether they are women, whether they are Jewish or Muslim, or whether they are born here in the US or immigrated here – they detest that people different than they, and with views different than theirs, have basic human rights and civil rights in this nation of ours.

Plainly stated, they seek to destroy.

So, we have to be better at building, than they are at destroying.

We have to build our power. And our power comes from our numbers.

This is why organizations, and organizing, are so important.

I am moved by all of you here tonight, by the dedication of you all, and all you have done, and all we have accomplished together.

As we look back at the past 42 years of grassroots organizing for health care access and justice, there is no doubt in my mind about what works, and what it takes, to make the kinds of changes we need.

It takes collective struggle. It takes all of us coming together. It takes a vision, motivated by a desire to improve people's lives and to work for the public good. It takes dedication, courage, stamina, compassion, and humor. I'm proud to be with you, and to say, that, collectively, we've got what it takes!

As I think about Big Pharma, the Golden Bedpan winner this year – there is no doubt in my mind about what we're up against, and why what we do – all of us working together – is so important.

Just imagine where our community and our nation would be without us, and the others like us around the country!

We are working for the public good, to create a healthier and more just community and society. But all too often, our work takes place against the backdrop and the efforts of others who are working for some other purpose that is at odds with the greater good.

When we work for justice – whether it's fighting against an injustice, or working to create something new to improve the lives of people – we are working for the public good and in the public interest.

But it's not easy. We are all too often David against Goliath. Our struggles are long and difficult, and it is easy to become discouraged.

One might feel discouraged and beat down, when one sees the ravages of the lives harmed and must bear witness, day after day, to the unnecessary and monumental suffering of people.

Sometimes we get tired. Sometimes we fall down. Sometimes we need others to help pick us up, dust us off, and help us get back to the struggle.

But whatever it takes, we have to fight, we have to keep working. It takes all of us. It is okay to get tired, but not to give up. Never give up.

We cannot turn away from human suffering; we cannot abdicate responsibility to do what we can for others; and we cannot give up.

In all our different ways, what we are fighting for is justice.

We have to keep working. Because what we are fighting for – whether it's health care access or environmental health, civil rights, disability rights (which are civil rights), or labor rights – we are fighting for justice. We are fighting for the people's ability to have a better life, to reduce suffering. It is justice that makes life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness possible.

So, no matter how tired we are, how frustrated we get, we don't give up.

And when we work together, amazing things happen. Not only do we make progress in our struggle, but we find hope.

We develop respect, trust, and even friendships – friendships forged in struggle are a special kind of friendship. We achieve small victories that sustain us on the long road to the grand victory. We learn to celebrate, we learn to love one another. And tremendously important, we learn that we can count on one another. We gain a new faith – it is the faith that we are there for each other.

And so, in the midst of the long difficult work, we discover these precious and unforeseen gifts, these gifts that forever change us and make us better. And our hope and our faith are renewed and restored, and we keep going, and we don't give up.

My hope lives in regular people, who motivated by compassion, come together to do extraordinary things.

Tonight, what we are really celebrating is our collective commitment to not give up, no matter what. To not turn away.

I am proud to walk the long haul with you, and to work with you for however long it takes – you who are on the side of our better angels.

So, thank you for celebrating with us tonight! The struggles will be there tomorrow.

On behalf of the Board and staff at Health Care Consumers, thank you so much for being here, and thank you for not giving up!

Thank you so much and have a great evening.