

PEGGY WALLACE KENNEDY  
ON THE STEPS OF THE ALABAMA STATE CAPITOL  
IN HONOR OF THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE SELMA TO MONTGOMERY MARCH  
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA  
MARCH 8, 2015

Montgomery, Alabama, a city that bears the scars of struggle and the nobility of change. A city that sits on the soil of shared sorrows for those that suffered and died for equality. A place of repose. Monuments of stone that connect us to each other. A place of hope and of promise. A place to lay our grief down and shoulder the burden of moving beyond the sunset of despair to the place we call home.

All of us come to this moment and to this place on the road of our own life's personal journey. We are diverse in our experiences, our aspirations and our dreams. But we are united in the common belief that a vision for a Just America is worth the saving.

Stepping away from a painful past has not always been easy, but it has always been right. None of us can be held responsible for the circumstances of our birth, but each one of us will be held responsible for who we have become.

When my son Burns was young, my husband and I took him to the Martin Luther King Historic Site in Atlanta. As we moved through the exhibits we came across the photographs of fire hoses in Birmingham, the 16th Street Baptist Church, Governor Wallace standing in the Schoolhouse Door and the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Burns stood still as the truth of his family's past washed over him. He turned to me and asked, "Why did Paw Paw does those things to other people?"

I realized then at that moment I was at a crossroad in my life and the life of my son. The mantle had passed and it was now up to me to do for Burns what my father never did for me. It was the first step in my journey of building a legacy of my own. I knelt down beside my son, drew him close and said. "Paw Paw never told me why he did those things, but I know that he was

wrong. So maybe, it will just have to be up to me and you to help make things right.”

Standing here before you today is yet another day for the fulfillment of the promise that I made to my son. For today and for all the tomorrows to come, there are opportunities for all of us to raise the call for justice in our lifetime.

Montgomery Alabama, Dexter Avenue and the State Capitol are enshrined in the annals of American history. A historic place for historic times. But for me, it is much more personal, for it brings to mind the events that shaped my life. It was here that I attended four inaugurations of my father and one of my mother's. It was here that I heard my father say the words, segregation today, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever.

It was here that my father fought to support a culture of exclusion, riding on the wings of fear rather than seeking justice on the wings of eagles. It was here that my mother Governor Lurleen Wallace lay in state following her death at the age of 41 while thousands of Alabamians both white and African American stood in line for hours to pay their last respects.

It was here that my father met Vivian Malone for the second time and told her that she was an icon of the civil right movement. It was at the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Church, a block away, that my father went to ask for forgiveness for his racist past. A moment that could not rewrite his personal history but an opportunity brought about by my father's own suffering that allowed him to see the hurt of history in the eyes of African American men and women who had been denied the right to live the American Dream.

But on March the 25th of 1965, as Ralph Abernathy, Juanita Abernathy, Martin Luther King and thousands more gathered in the shadow of this Capitol, there was never an opportunity to redress their concerns or state their grievances to the one person who could have changed the course of American History then and there. For Governor Wallace watched through a window in the privacy of his office, while others persevered and changed the history of America without him.

Today, we must not allow others to make the right choices for us. We must have courage each day to stand up for equality and the rights of all Americans. We must lead by example and live our lives with inspiration, always aspiring to make the choices that lead us to higher ground, that guide us to understanding and purpose of not just who we are but who we can become. An opportunity for each of you, an obligation for all of us, to see others, feel others and celebrate others, respecting their humanity for who they are. Working each day to inspire the nobility that lies in the heart of each of us, Martin Luther King taught that there is power in all of us to reach out, to support and stand firm the belief that all of our lives count for something. There is no better time than now for Americans to hold hands, rather than holding down the inherent rights of the common man. One can never measure the true worth of a mended heart that beats again because someone cared.

How many more anniversaries of the struggle for civil rights can we celebrate by looking over our shoulder rather than standing shoulder to shoulder to face the challenges that lay ahead. How can Americans reach for higher ground if we do not inspire others with what we do.

We cannot expect the next generation of Americans to do something to change the world if we aspire to do nothing to protect liberty and recognize our individual obligations to service. How can we teach future generations about positive social change if we see injustice and turn our backs? For injustice knows no death. It rises like a dark mist on the horizon, laying low in the hearts of those that are unwilling to accept the notion of unconditional love.

We must promise that when we say all men are created equal, it means something, protects something and encourages us to embrace the belief that the diversity among us has nothing to do with equality, but has everything to do with strength. Tolerance must be more than what we believe, it must be what we live and leading by example is what we must do. Tolerance does not always mean agreement, but tolerance always requires understanding and compassion for others. Very few of us will have monuments built to honor us after we are gone, but all of us can do monumental things each day to help America be better.

The moments in Selma yesterday will stand as a testament to all of our lives. For there is power in moving forward, there is joy in an unburdened heart and there is strength in stepping away from beneath the shadows of your lives.

I sometimes wonder what my mother and father would think of their daughter who stands here today, and my mind's eye returns to a wood framed house on Eufaula Street in Clayton Alabama, when life was uncomplicated and happiness was something you lived not something you just hoped for. And my father would smile at me and say, "little girl, you're doing just fine, I sure am proud of you."

But for today, I am most thankful for the life and inspiration of Congressman John Lewis. Congressman Lewis, in March of 2009 you held my hand and walked with me across the Edmund Pettus Bridge; the very bridge where, as a young man, you were beaten by Alabama State Troopers. That walk with you helped me understand the power of forgiveness and gave me the courage to speak with my own voice. Since that time I have looked for an opportunity to return, in some small measure, to return the gift of love and understanding you gave to me.

Fifty years ago, you stood here in front of your State Capitol and sought an opportunity as a citizen of Alabama to be recognized and heard by your Governor, and he refused. But today, as his daughter and as a person of my own, I want to do for you what my father should have done and recognize you for your humanity and for your dignity as a child of God, as a person of goodwill and character and as a fellow Alabamian. And say.....welcome.....home.