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I want to thank Maryam Elahi, Govind Menon and other members of the Board of Directors for inviting me to speak with you this evening at the annual meeting of the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut. There are so many people here this evening whom I have had the honor and privilege to work with over the past few years—Maryam, Lee Terry, Steve Larcen, Eileen Ossen and others—servant leaders all of you! Thank you for all you do for the people of eastern Connecticut!

We are here tonight because we share values that have caused all of us to pursue a life of service in some way. We should be heartened by the knowledge that possessing a spirit of giving, having a personal commitment to helping those in need, and living a life of service to others are not Republican or Democratic values.

They are not limited to one religious faith. They are also not limited to people who live in this country. Helping others and having a generous spirit are human traits, and I know they will always endure.

Tip O’Neill once said, “All politics are local,” recognizing that issues impacting people must be addressed in communities and neighborhoods, not on Twitter or CNN. Someone else also said, “All change is local,” which means to me that the way we improve the quality of life in our country and in the world is by taking care of the people in our own communities. When individuals are generous, when they get together to organize in their communities to serve those in need in their own neighborhoods — that is how we make America great.

We are here tonight to talk about the leadership of the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut in serving the communities of our region.

When you look at each word in this organization’s name, interesting insights emerge, and I am reminded why we are here tonight. Let us look at the words found in “The Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut.”

First, “Community.” All of us live in a community of some sort. Rural, urban, large and small, each made up of families and neighborhoods. Even people living in large cities like New York and Los Angeles have a local neighborhood that grounds them and defines their lives in some way. In our neighborhoods, each of us sees familiar faces — in the grocery store, in church, in synagogues, jogging on our street, picking up children at the local school. And it is in our local communities where most philanthropy must occur.

The next word. “Foundation.” The word comes from the Latin “to lay a base.” I would argue that the foundation of a community has three levels.

If we think of a community as a “house” that supports and serves those who live within it, then the individuals who offer their personal support are the first level of our “base.” Individual donors — people who give of their time and money — are the bedrock of every philanthropic act we do collectively.

The second component of the foundation of our communities is the nonprofit community, the organizations that provide direct services to people in need. Food, shelter, clothing, heating in the winter, childcare, nutrition, healthcare — the list of services our nonprofit community provides runs the gamut of all human needs. There are many publicly

supported state and federal agencies that also serve the needs of local residents, but we all know what has happened to our state budget in the past decade, and we can only imagine what is going to happen to federally supported services in the next few years. The nonprofit sector may never have been more important to the health and vitality of our communities.

That brings us to the third component of our model — think of this as the mortar that holds our foundation of support together. I am speaking here of private philanthropic leadership in our communities, in the case of this part of our state, the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut.

By appealing to the generosity of individual donors and providing leadership and advocacy in supporting dozens of local nonprofits, the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut continues to offer hope and a helping hand to thousands of local residents each year.

For 33 years now, this foundation and its predecessors have served as a bridge between the generosity of local donors and the needs of eastern Connecticut, infusing resources into the nonprofit community that directly provides services.

Protecting basic rights, serving the health and wellness needs of local residents, offering educational and economic opportunities, and protecting the environment are values that inform the work of the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut. And that work is impressive! Last year you received \$10 million in gifts, and handed out \$5 million to 200 nonprofits, as well as more than \$500,000 in scholarships to more than 200 college students.

The funds you gave out were 25% more than the prior year—that is simply amazing! I think the fact this foundation serves 42 Connecticut towns, more than any of the other 21 community foundations in our state, is also an indicator of the scope of your work.

Your work to empower youth by supporting preschool education, teenage girls, and other youth marks a commitment to future generations of state residents.

In promoting basic needs and rights by supporting the economic mobility of low-income women and the Covenant Soup Kitchen in Willimantic, you recognize that we cannot feed the mind before we feed the body first. Your commitment to preserving the environment through your science in nature program and the Patricia Proctor Scholarship reminds us all that we must take care of the paradise we have been given.

What the foundation and the nonprofit community is doing here in eastern Connecticut is being repeated in communities across the nation, and not by accident. We are a generous nation because of the enduring values on which this country was built. The United States remains the world's strongest and greatest democracy because of our commitment to basic human rights and political, economic and social freedoms. We are a country that has always embraced opportunity—**for all of us**. Only by uplifting those of us less fortunate can all of us be free.

In a democracy, service to others is an essential citizenship skill and duty. Fulfilling that duty may become more difficult in the short term. The people in this room tonight — individually and collectively — may have to raise up their voices to advocate for what we believe in. It may mean speaking out against efforts to divide us.

It may mean working harder to protect the rights and serve the needs of those less fortunate than us. It surely means we can never compromise the principles that ground our lives and the nation we hold so dear.

Here in Connecticut, we must continue to value the services you provide our local communities — feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, protecting the vulnerable, healing the sick, and educating our young people — for they will always be our future.

If public funds continue to be stretched in meeting the needs of our citizens, the safety net that our nonprofit community has helped to create will become even more critical to meeting the needs of local residents.

As we face this challenge together, we can find strength from several sources. First, we must lean on the values that form our very being. Nothing is more human than the spirit of helping others. We can also find strength in each other — look around this room and know what a power exists among you! And finally, you can find inspiration and strength from the people you serve. Each of them has a face, and they shine brightly back at you whenever you look.

There have been other times in our nation when people have taken it upon themselves to act bravely to help those in dire need. During the Civil War, the Underground Railroad helped slaves escape. In the 1960s, white people traveled from the north to help integrate our southern states. And following September 11, Americans throughout our nation flocked to New York to help that city.

So let us stop for a moment and ask ourselves “how much are we willing to do?” Remember the Underground Railroad, the Civil Rights Movement, and 9/11. Each of these powerful historical moments occurred in their own way and affected our values.

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The year was 1850 and night was falling on the hills of western Massachusetts. The wooden floor of the barn where Sarah was hiding was partially covered with hay, and the air had the familiar scent of cow dung. Other than a sliver of moonlight shining through a crack in the roof, the barn was pitch black, helping to hide the young, dark-skinned woman.

Sarah breathed deeply, knowing that if she was discovered, she would face a brutal beating . . . perhaps even death. She touched the scar on her forehead, a permanent reminder of her status as a slave. As she huddled in silence, she thought of her family and her young child back on a plantation so many miles to the south. Would she ever see her baby again? She swore a silent oath that she would.

The silence was interrupted by the sound of footsteps and Sarah was startled to sense a figure next to her. “Captured!” she thought. Instead, a strong, white hand reached out and guided her as she sobbed and wobbled to the safety of a carriage and freedom.

100 years later. It is June 1964 in Neshoba County, Mississippi, 50 miles northeast of Jackson. The sweat poured off Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner’s faces, even though they had all the windows down in their beat-up station wagon. Goodman and Schwerner weren’t used to Mississippi in the summer, two New Yorkers who were part of a cadre of northern volunteers dispatched to the south to help register African Americans to vote. Fundamentally, in the center of their hearts, they loved the people they were called to serve. Their companion was a local youth their age — James Chaney — youthful looking, smart and full of defiance — and they had spent the past few weeks registering voters and dealing with the backlash of hate and anger from townspeople and the local police. Somehow, they were not deterred. Today, they were investigating the burning of an African American church, which

they suspected was absolutely a response to their activism. They were tense, watchful, fearful, but full of defiance only naiveté can give.

As dusk was falling, three cars pulled them over — a police car and two other regular cars filled with white men who were members of the Ku Klux Klan. They came upon the three young men like a herd of cattle erupting over them in a stampede. Andrew, James and Michael were pulled by their hair, arms, legs, and genitals from the vehicle in which they sat. They were beaten with clubs — blow after blow — as their car was set ablaze. As they slipped into unconsciousness, James saw someone raising a pistol, heard the first shot ring out . . . and then all was quiet. Quiet for all of them.

It is 10:15 a.m. on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, and a grey pall hangs in the air in lower Manhattan. “Joe” is an office supervisor on the lowest floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center and he felt an impact. It was like a bomb exploding around him. They all did and they began to panic for their lives as he began shepherding co-workers to the safety of the street. His clothing was completely covered in dust and he could hardly breathe. Joe was soaked with sweat combined with a heat he had never felt before.

He returns to the building one more time to see what he can do to help other people trapped inside. He fights for breath and manages to climb the stairs as the ash in the air continues to swirl and intensify. The stairwell above is blocked with humanity, so he focuses on pulling out more people from the floor he works on. The woman he is holding is almost lifeless from exhaustion as he manages to get her down to the street and pass her on to the arms of a firefighter before limping back into the building. It is 10:28 a.m., and the North Tower begins to collapse.

We have wandered for a few minutes to ask ourselves how much we would do; the plight of slaves in the 1850s, the conditions in the south in the 1960s, and the horrors that thousands of people faced on 9/11 all caused very real heroes to step up at those moments.

Surely there were many more cases of people courageously giving themselves — even, of course, their lives — to support others in harm’s way during these situations and countless others. Would I have acted in these powerful ways? I am not sure I would have.

As much as we are celebrating the work of groups of people tonight, organized to use their collective strength to make a difference in our communities, **it is ultimately individuals who inspire us with their bravery and generosity of spirit.**

They move us to act ourselves, gathering up our own courage. And they give us hope—a belief that our best days are still ahead of us.

We may not have the same level of heroism occurring daily in our midst, but the work of the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, and the nonprofit agencies it supports, is every bit as inspiring. As you provide food, healthcare, education, housing, clothing and other essential services, you are bringing hope to the communities in our region. You are providing that “base” or foundation of caring to our neighborhoods. Your work could not be more important.

Such generosity is at the heart of our democracy. There is nothing more democratic or noble than when people set aside their comfort and privilege to help their fellow man.

Service and generosity are human values that we as Americans have practiced since our nation’s earliest beginnings, and I am convinced that they will carry us forward, outliving any differences we may currently face today.

When we are dedicated to each other, to supporting those in need, anything and everything is possible. My objective tonight was to thank you for dreaming that anything is possible in Eastern Connecticut!