

Senator Levin, Madam Chairman and Manistee Democrats, it is a great pleasure to help honor the memory of Don Jennings and what his life represented. It is an example of what one can do with his life in a quiet and continual manner.

I grew up in Baldwin, Michigan, just a hop and a skip from Manistee but somewhat further in culture. My first “political” experience was hearing some of my republican forbearers refer to Eleanor Roosevelt as “old prune face.” This was not a very promising beginning for a future liberal, but those republican forbearers also arranged for me to grow up in a small, ostensibly integrated community in the 1950s to ponder the Korean War, Brown vs the Board of Education, Little Rock, Rosa Parks and much more... Strangely little was said of this in the halls and classrooms of Baldwin High School. We tiptoed around the issues and went to class, played sports and interacted pretty much like the mores of the community wanted us to do. Yes, there were some social and sexual tensions from time to time, but they invariably resolved themselves according to the prevalent taboos and we went on our way.

Then come the 1960s. One of my first memories is of John F. Kennedy on the steps of the Michigan Union in Ann Arbor facing a rambunctious crowd that had been waiting for several hours. But he immediately put the crowd in the palm of his hands by telling them that he was happy to be in Ann Arbor and that he had attended “the Michigan of the East, Haavaad.” There’s nothing like appealing to a little collective pride and ego to create good feelings. (It’s interesting to note that Senator Levin also attended the “Michigan of the East.....” He had the good sense to come back though.) This, of course, was the speech in which Kennedy outlined the Peace Corps, a program that has affected hundreds of thousands of Americans, including some in this audience, and we hope millions of citizens of the third world. So there any memories of small town, reflexive republican pretty much bit the dust.

Ann Arbor, in those days, was (and probably still is) a cauldron for ideas and issues and I was not immune to these. Tom Hayden of SDS and Jane Fonda fame was the editor of the Michigan Daily and roomed with friends of mine. Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett descended on the Law School accompanied by half a dozen stereotypical state troopers to explain that America was doomed because of

miscegenation just as (and I quote) “the Egyptian empire was doomed when the Nubian women started dancing down the Nile.” Malcolm X spoke to a standing room shoulder to shoulder crowd in the Michigan Union, outrageous doctrine, but fantastic charisma. I was swept up in the crowd when Martin Luther King practiced the march on Washington in Detroit and gave one of the earlier versions of his “I had a Dream” speech. Thoughts of my Republican past faded until little if any remained.

So when the Michigan Daily advertised “Wanted Teachers for West Africa,” and with John Kennedy’s proclamation of the Peace Corp from the Union steps echoing in my ears, Law School seemed a frivolous distraction. My fate was sealed.

Goodbye law school, hello Nigeria. I had the good fortune to be assigned to a school that was headed by a charismatic Nigerian named Tai Solarin. He took the mythology of our founding fathers seriously and named his school Mayflower School, dedicated to separation of church and state, democracy and hard physical work as well as challenging academics. I spent almost five years there teaching English. I’m sure I got more out of it than my students did. But I did experience

several coups and a civil war and learned a lot about how different people lived and how little one needs to lead a satisfying life.

It would be nice to say that I left war torn Nigeria to return to the peaceful United States, but in fact, I entered graduate school at the University of Wisconsin and attended classes by passing between National Guard troops on each side of the entrance to my main classroom building, the smell of tear gas lingering on the morning breeze. Noon was the time when you checked to see what demonstration was assembling to march to the state capital building, only about 8 blocks away. Evenings we hung out with friends, one of whom was selling marijuana from the State Attorney General's house. We all took a few days off to attend the antiwar march on Washington. Hmmm. Still not much encouragement for any conservative tendencies that might have been lurking in the underbrush.

So somehow I ended up back in the metropolis of Baldwin, Michigan, got married and ended up as a token candidate for State Representative against Manistee's own Dennis Cawthorne. I'm sure that a lot of you here remember him. Dennis would probably be a centrist Democrat in today's political atmosphere. I lost, of

course, but I learned a few things:

1. That a bearded hippy looking 32 year old with a black wife stood no chance whatsoever in a Republican district in 1972.
2. That I was a lousy campaigner and
3. That I never wanted to run for political office again.

Certainly I appreciate those who do run for office. Bless Senator Levin, future Representative Stobie and future Congressman Cannon. They're taking their civic responsibility seriously and with their minds and bodies and lives. We need to support them in every way that we can. And it doesn't let the rest of us off the hook. Our democracy is sustained by more than our elected representatives.

A number of years ago I wrote a position paper that was circulated among some of our local democratic leaders and eventually a version of it was reported in the local paper. The gist of the paper was that we needed to, as democrats, lead constantly in our community, not just every two or four years. We needed to participate in all aspects of public life. Participating in the planning commissions, boards of review, the school boards, the Kiwanis Club, the Rotary Club, the

Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Development Authority, church boards and the dozens of other local organizations that make our communities function. We needed, in Christian terms, to *witness* our values to the community. And in doing such, make the Democratic Party *valuable* in the community... and in doing such make the Democratic Party *powerful* in the community. We needed to create a Democratic Party that people looked to for leadership, an organization that was consulted and courted when there were significant community issues or projects, whose endorsement was meaningful to the success or the project.

I can't say that we have achieved that goal, but I believe it is still a goal that we aspire to.

But in a larger sense, we need to witness Democratic values every day in our lives. We, as Democrats, believe in economic and social justice and we need to live up to our values every day. We need to tell others that poverty and ignorance is not OK, that racist and sexist jokes are not funny, that all human beings have dignity and deserve our basic respect. I can't say that I have been or will be perfect in living up

to those ideals, but if there is any reason that I have been given the Don Jennings Award, I hope that it is because I have tried.

I would like to thank my family, many of whom are here tonight and especially my big brother Jay, who although he could not be here, made it possible for some of limited means to attend. I would like to thank the Jennings family members who are here tonight, the committee who chose me and all the rest who took time out of your lives to support ideas that you believe in. We have serious challenges ahead (I don't mean Ebola) especially in areas of income inequality and voter rights. I challenge you all to live up to the memory of Don Jennings

Thank you.