

Remarks by Senator George J. Mitchell Cheverus High School

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Last year, as a Federal Judge, I presided at Naturalization ceremonies where about fifty persons became American citizens by choice. For most Americans, citizenship is an accident of birth. As a result, too few of us give any thought to the meaning of American citizenship, especially the duties and responsibilities that go with it.

We are fortunate to live in the most free, the most open, the most just society in all of human history. That is partly chance. But it is also partly the result of human endeavor — the efforts of men and women who were conscious of their responsibilities as citizens.

I believe deeply that every single person in this nation has an obligation, a positive duty, to actively participate in preserving and improving our form of government and our way of life.

For all the good things about America, it is far from perfect. Discrimination on account of race, religion and sex are declining, but they are still disturbing facts of life.

Despite our wealth and prosperity, far too many Americans -- especially our elderly -- live in an unending cycle of poverty and misery.

It remains the task of every American -- and that includes each of you -- to right the wrongs of our society, to combat injustice, to reduce poverty, intolerance and ignorance.

You can help in many ways.

One way is to actively participate in government. Despite the justifiable cynicism of many Americans, growing out of the events of recent years, public service can be meaningful and

satisfying.

For most human beings, life is a quest, a constant search for self-respect and the respect of others, for personal pride, for a measure of dignity. There is no single road to self-respect. Yet, in my opinion, nothing equals the satisfaction of public service -- the opportunity to help others. It offers a rare opportunity to satisfy man's noblest impulse.

John Kennedy struck a responsive chord, not only here in America but throughout the world, when he challenged Americans to ask not what their country could do for them, but rather what they could do for their country.

The spirit which spawned that phrase and the response to it remains today, and I find it especially alive among young people. I hope it is true of you.

For those of you who are not disposed to participate in government, the opportunity to meet your obligations of citizenship exists in voluntary community effort.

We need greater volunteer effort in crime prevention, in care of the elderly, in treatment of the ill and handicapped, and in other areas of social activity. Volunteer work is not a luxury. It is a necessity for a civilized society that wants to truly meet its human needs.

Thomas Jefferson said that "All men are created equal." That statement is true in the sense in which it was intended -- in the sense that each person is endowed with certain inalienable rights. But it is not true in the physical or mental sense. We are of different sizes, shapes, intellects and talents. There is no way in which any human institution can make us all the same.

Human progress throughout history owes its origin to that diversity. We must keep a system that allows us to develop and use the talents and excellence of all, no matter what their origin.

Remember the really great people of each generation are those who have a commitment to excellence -- a commitment to be at all times, in all places, under all circumstances, the very best that they can be, at whatever they do.

John Gardner said it best in this century when he wrote: "An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water."

In the name of progress, we have segregated and we have specialized. We have nursing homes for the old, child-care for the young, mental hospitals for those who are different from the rest of us. And schools that start early and keep going till one's mid-20's, longer in many cases. We have become in many ways an institutional society. Somehow we have to find a way to re-create the spirit of neighborliness and mutual self-support that for years was part of our society. Somehow we must pull together and try to bear one another's burdens in a human, compassionate way.

If this is possible anywhere, it ought to be possible in Maine. There is here a unique sense of community, a closeness to the land, a feeling of stability and continuity. It is a large part of the appeal of Maine. It is why thousands of people come here every year from other more urban parts of the country. This is a remarkable place to live. You can make it even better.

With your graduation from high school, you have passed one milestone in your lives, as you move on -- to further education, to jobs, to new families and new responsibilities -- you will find that your lives become more serious. Soon you will no longer be competing for grades and popularity, but for survival.

If you remember nothing else I say today, I hope you will remember those words by John Gardner. For as you choose a career, as you decide what to do with your life, remember that excellence is achieved as much by how you do it, as it is by what you do. A mechanic, a janitor, a factory worker who takes pride in what he or she does can achieve excellence in a way that a doctor, a lawyer or engineer who is without that pride cannot. Education is desirable. It is necessary. But it is not a substitute for effort. It is not a guarantee of self-worth.

As you leave here today, remember that real fulfillment in life comes not from leisure, not from taking it easy, not from idleness or self-indulgence, but rather from striving with all one's physical and spiritual might for a worthwhile objective.

I hope that each of you is fortunate enough to find such an objective in your life. If you do, try your best; take pride in what you do; look for the best in others; and you will find it.

Good luck and God bless each of you.