

# AWARD BANQUET

U.S. CONGRESSMAN

James Langevin

Let me say first and foremost, I hear a lot of speeches in the course of my work. I am always impressed by those speeches that are direct, brief and to the point. So tonight I will practice the three Bs of public speaking, which is to be brief, be sincere, and be seated; One down and two to go. (Laughter)

I want to thank ALDA for this opportunity to speak to you this evening. Today I want to talk about the importance of fully integrating people with disabilities into the work force, and the ways in which our lives and our businesses are enriched in this effort. Most important of all, I want to talk to you about dreams. After all, I wouldn't be here today if I had ever stopped dreaming.

The Americans with Disabilities Act was a wonderful piece of legislation. It changed the world for many people with disabilities. I know that there are so many stories in this room, of how your lives were different before the ADA was passed and how it changed as a result of the Act. That's not to say that we don't have still a long way to go. But I can say without hesitation that if it weren't for the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act it would not have been possible for me to serve in the United States Congress. As you know, there are 54 million people just like me who face daily challenges due to some level of disability. They work, contribute to their communities and strive to reach their dreams. As I said, the ADA has made that possible in so many ways.

However, today, 11 years since the ADA became law, there are still too many people who face so many unnecessary obstacles. The unemployment rate for Americans with disabilities hovers at 70 percent. Homeownership rates for Americans with disabilities are in the single digits. Internet access for Americans with disabilities is half of that for people without disabilities. But these numbers can and will change, thanks to the continuing commitment from those dedicated to opening doors for people with disabilities. In particular, President Bush has proposed the New Freedom Initiative of which I'm a cosponsor and a supporter, a series of proposals designed to increase opportunities for people with disabilities, to improving housing, work place accessibility, technology and transportation. I can tell you and promise you that I am determined to work with my colleagues in Congress who increased Federal funding for programs that address the deplorable unemployment rate of which I spoke. I plan to work with disability organizations to strengthen the ADA, and with the education and business communities for the developing emerging technologies to insure that accessibility is an integral part of innovation and not just a mere after thought. All of us in these efforts will be made in conjunction with advocates like yourselves, striving to make the work place accessible, so that it employs people with disabilities who I believe are America's greatest untapped resource today; a resource of knowledge, skills and talent, that can make a tremendous difference both in their communities and to our national economy.

But each and every one of us who faces a disability of any kind-- or any challenge in life must do our part by remembering to persevere and to pursue our dreams. We all dream. I had a dream of becoming a police officer and entering the field of law enforcement as a young man. But that

dream was ended at the age of 16 when the gun accidentally discharged while I was a police cadet. That bullet severed my spinal cord and changed my life forever. But with the help and support of my family, my friends and the entire community, I was able to persevere and develop new dreams. Today my dream of serving in Congress has become a reality. Everyone in this room, and everyone in the State of Rhode Island and people across this country are struggling to overcome some form of challenge at one kind or another. Life, I believe, is often a perseverance test: God's way of testing us, shaping us, challenging us and molding us.

No one escapes those tests or challenges. I love Hemmingway's quote, one of my favorite, "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong in the broken places." To persevere means we need to do three things: to dream, to just do it, and then dig a little deeper. All of us have hopes and dreams. All of us have a special gift, something that we can do better than anyone else in the world. And the test in life, the challenge in life, the obligation that we all have is to find out what that talent is, that gift is, develop it and then share it with the world to try to make this world a better place.

I love Robert Kennedy's quote that say, "Some people see things as they are and ask why. I dream of things that have never been and say why not." Then once you have a dream, you have to just do it. You have to make it happen. One of the most successful advertising campaigns in history is Nike's "Just Do It" commercial. It means rolling up your sleeves and putting your doubts aside and doing it, believing in yourself because only you know what's inside of you. Only you know what you are capable of. And don't ever let anyone discourage you. That means putting those fears and those doubts aside, having faith in yourself and faith in God, who I believe is always constantly a companion as we go through life and face our daily challenges. I couldn't get by without Him in my life.

I like the quote that I heard about the mustard seed that says, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed you will say to that mountain, move from here to there, and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." And then once you dream it, and you just did it, and you are working to make your dreams come true, there will come a time when you will have to dig deep inside yourselves and push even harder. Digging deeper than you ever thought possible. One of my favorite stories is that of Henry Comstock, the prospector back in the 1800s, who said, and rather who bought a mine and started digging, and staked his claim convinced that somewhere just beneath the surface was the mother lode. He kept digging and digging and he would find some gold here or there but still he was convinced that somewhere just beneath the surface was the mother lode. Days turned into weeks and weeks into months and months into years until somebody came along and offered him some money for that claim, \$2,000, which was a lot of money in those days. He accepted that offer. Well, the new owner of this mine started digging, not too much further, just a few feet below the surface. And there that person hit the mother lode. The mine produced somewhere in the area of 340 million dollars in gold.

In his first inaugural address, FDR said, "Happiness lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort." Given the proper resources and training and opportunities, every American should realize their dreams, experience great joy. I want to thank you again for having me here tonight. I wish you well and a successful conference, and I hope you will come back many times to Rhode Island in the future. God bless you and God bless America.

Thank you very much.

**Congressman Jim Langevin has dedicated his life to public service and opening the doors of government to its rightful owners—the people of this country. In Rhode Island Langevin was elected in 1994 as the youngest Secretary of State in the country and now serves as a U.S. Congressman for the second Congressional District of Rhode Island. In 1980 at the age of 16 the congressman was paralyzed in an accident as a police cadet in the Boy Scout Explorer Program, and has dedicated his life to giving something back to the community that provided an outpouring of support for him at that time. Jim lives in Warwick, Rhode Island and has served on the Board of Directors of Rhode Island American Red Cross, PARI Independent Living, Tech Access, The Warwick Shelter and the Rhode Island March of Dimes. The congressman is also a member of the Knights of Columbus, Lions Club and Save the Bay.**