

# Making Leadership a Reality

Harriet Mayor Fulbright

*Editor's note: Harriet Mayor Fulbright is the widow of the late J. William Fulbright, who served five six-year terms as a Democratic U.S. senator from Arkansas and who was the catalyst behind the international student exchange program that bears his name. Harriet Fulbright is president of the J. William & Harriet Fulbright Center, a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to promote world peace and nonviolent means of resolving conflicts through international collaboration and education programs. Following is the text of a graduation speech that Harriet Fulbright gave on May 23, 2006, at the Early College of Guilford, an advanced-placement public high school in Greensboro, North Carolina.*

It is such a pleasure to be here with you at this major turning point in your lives. This excellent institution of learning has not only drilled the normal fundamentals into you but has honed your analytical skills and powers of observation and encouraged you to examine your values and think about your role in a community. This is more than just minimal training to become a literate human being; it is preparation for leadership. What I would like to do is to give you some examples of differing types of leadership, to give that concept concrete meaning so you can make it a reality in your future.

The first example is the story of a young woman who used her training to expand the life of a small village a continent away and to highlight its culture. Paula Taylor, an American artist and graphic designer who had

been working with children in remote and destitute areas of Zimbabwe and South Africa for two months each year, was given the opportunity to explore areas among the Luo and Masai tribes in Kenya. Her initial objective was to repair leaking roofs in dilapidated classrooms and teachers' houses at a rural school.

However, when the headmaster, who was a visionary, saw her helping the children draw simple graphics on her laptop computer during her leisure time, he asked Paula to show his teachers how to teach art. He explained to her that teachers did not want to come to his school because the village was so poor. He was sure, however, that art could change that. Luckily, Paula had brought along a small case of art supplies and also knew how to create art out of found objects, so she agreed and started working with the teachers.

That afternoon she showed them how to make clay out of dirt, flour, salt, and water, and she taught the teachers basic clay techniques. The next day the teachers gathered twigs and grass, and Paula taught them how to create small frames to be used for the self-portraits they had drawn. Inspired, the teachers cleared out an old storage room to use for art classes, and the program began. It went so well that when Paula returned home, she gave talks about her experience and persuaded her listeners to send 250 pounds of art supplies to the African school. Through this experience Americans learned

about another culture an ocean away and realized how valuable their help was in enriching other people's lives.

"Since our first visit three years ago," Paula wrote, "Sidakeni Primary School has progressed and is now known for its art program. The school is so popular that it cannot provide jobs for all the teachers who request positions there. The whole community has a new sense of pride in their school and their village. Village craftsmen give classes regularly at the school and help students sell their crafts. With some of the earned money, a new well was dug on the school grounds and provides good water for the entire village. Sidakeni village is achieving its vision to make the world a better place for their children." Paula is a perfect example of the truth of Edmund Burke's statement: "No one could make a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little."

My next example is quite different in size and scope. The University of Georgia had long been proud of its status as the first chartered, state supported university in the country, but about thirty years ago it came to the realization that the scholarship of its student body was no cause for celebration. An examination of the issue made university officials realize that too many of the top high school students in Georgia were choosing institutions in neighboring states. A closer look, through a survey, showed that scholarship money was a prime consideration in these students' choices.

UGA's administration therefore created a comprehensive scholarship program called HOPE, an acronym for Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally.

To qualify for this full scholarship, a student must graduate from high school with a minimum of a 3.0 grade average and with a diploma in the college preparatory track. UGA's student body began to change. An article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* stated that "few state institutions have become so much more competitive so quickly. The number of freshmen who graduated from high school with at least a 3.9 grade-point average has jumped from 331 in 1992 to 853 in 1997." In-state freshmen who receive a HOPE scholarship now make up 85 to 90 percent of each year's entering class.

The University of Georgia could have hastily hired a Nobel-prize-winning professor or built a state-of-the-art science lab, but instead it did its homework. It listened to the students who were choosing other universities so that it could address the real problem. Leadership always involves careful listening before leaping into action.

Another illustrative example of successful collaboration is more personal. Six years ago I was diagnosed with a rare blood cancer called Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia. I was told that it was incurable and fatal but that I probably had at least five decent years of life left. That energized me into consulting a world-class nutritionist and searching for the best specialist doctor in the country. Steve Treon worked as a hematological oncologist at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, and during our first meeting he spoke of his frustration over the fact that there were so few people with the disease that research was difficult. We talked about setting up a research fund and the possibility of looking beyond the United States for colleagues. Within a year Steve had organized an international conference with specialists

from nine overseas institutions and had begun discussing collaborative research projects and information sharing. The conference established a consortium that now includes twenty-five institutions from all five major continents, and he expects the number to double by the end of this year.

The results have been nothing short of miraculous. The different regional perspectives and training of the participating physicians have enriched the project as a whole and each member in it. Cells that were completely ignored before are now understood to be central to the formation and progress of the disease. As

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you can see, I am far from dead six years later. In fact, my blood is now healthy and normal.

Steve Treon understood the power of collaboration. He knew that if he shared the results of his research freely, he could attract like-minded physicians from around the world. The resulting knowledge about Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia is expanding rapidly, and who knows, there might even be a cure in sight soon.

Senator Fulbright's international education exchange program is my last example. How on earth did he come up with the idea that an international academic program would accomplish his goal, which was to help prevent World War III? First, he spent months conferring with colleagues and friends—anyone who would talk with him—about how to help prevent another worldwide conflict. Through these conversations he

became convinced that if potential future leaders could live and work in another culture for long enough to confront, absorb, and understand different ways of thinking, they would be far more willing to try to solve conflicts through an exchange of ideas rather than bullets.

Senator Fulbright developed a vision out of his own experience and the advice of a wide variety of friends and colleagues, and he translated it into a program that has exerted profound changes in attitudes and our manner of dealing with each other. Now, sixty years later, it has educated over a quarter of a million scholars and is one of the world's most powerful forces for promoting mutual understanding and collaborative activity.

As you can see, leadership is about listening and interacting with those around you and knowing how to use your skills and equipment to benefit others. It is about conducting an examination of a problem, being careful enough to understand the central core of that problem, and knowing how to arrive at a truly effective solution. It is a willingness to reach out and collaborate freely with others on an issue of common interest, no matter how daunting. It always takes hard work and perseverance.

With these attributes a leader can engage the hearts and loyalty of a friend, a community, a nation, or any group so that all its members can together engage in meaningful work leading to satisfying improvements and accomplishments. Like Paula Taylor, the University of Georgia, Dr. Steve Treon, and Senator J. William Fulbright, we can all give real meaning to the words of Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the *only* thing that has."

And I don't doubt that this small band before me collectively will make changes we cannot imagine, and I will be cheering you on.

Thank you. 🍀