

Upon Receiving the Con Hogan Award by Ellen Kahler, 10.8.15

I want to thank the **Con Hogan award committee, those who made a financial contribution to this award, the Vermont Community Foundation (VCF)** and those who nominated me for this award. I am deeply honored. Thank you all for coming this afternoon to celebrate Con's work, and to share this very special occasion with me.

I want to thank **Con** for his life's work and contribution on behalf of children and families in Vermont. I met Con – and his entire senior staff – it must have been in 1997 -- in order to walk them through the Job Gap Study findings and to provide some information that might be helpful to their work. At the time I was totally naïve about how government works, who Con was, or how many thousands of Vermonters lives are touched by the Agency of Human Services every year. I really had no idea how he and his team might use the data or where it might lead.

Thank you, Con, for being so thoughtful about how good data can inform the design of our programs and public policy. Your bold and strategic leadership has served as a good example for so many of us.

This recognition for my work and leadership, in Con's name, is deeply humbling. Humbling because, as we all know, no one does this work alone. It has been my incredible good fortune to be mentored by generous and strategic leaders and to work with so many talented, bright, caring and dedicated co-workers, collaborators, and colleagues over the years. This award is really a recognition of what WE have done together.

I owe a lot of gratitude to a number of important people who opened doors and /or collaborated with me, early on in my career. So, I'm going to start with some thank-yous. These people deserve my thanks, and are as a reminder to all of you in this room that you have opportunities to open doors and support the work of people around you. I hope you realize that your choices to provide input, open doors, or create opportunity for young professionals often leads to the creation of the next generation of our leaders.

First and foremost a huge thanks to **Doug Hoffer** – now our tremendous Auditor of Accounts – who has brought integrity and professionalism to that office over the past 3 years. Without Doug, truthfully, the Vermont Job Gap Study would never have happened and the Livable Wage campaign would have had no working basis. He is also responsible for producing the Leaky Bucket report which highlighted the economic opportunity to keep more of our food, forest and energy dollars here in Vermont – which has also led to our more recent farm to plate work at the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund (VSJF).

Then there was **Jan Eastman**. It was Jan – then at the Snelling Center for Government – who saw the Job Gap Study’s potential and connected me to people like **Robbie Harold** at USDA Rural Development, **Charlotte Stetson** and **Dave Rahr** at the VCF. They provided critical early-on financial support and encouraged my leadership. These connections led me to be on the Board of the Vermont Community Foundation for 8 years, starting in my early 30s. My years on that board provided an invaluable education, strengthened my connection to Con Hogan and Cheryl Mitchell and opened up many other doors.

Gretchen Morse was a big time mentor of mine – as she has been for so many women over the years. She encouraged me to join the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission also in my early 30s, which helped me learn about our land use laws, also relevant to my work today.

And then there was the masterful door opener – **Susan Bartlett**. Back in 1999 the minimum wage was \$5.25 and she was Chair of Senate Economic Development Committee. We were trying to win a multi-year minimum wage increase, and she suggested that we push through a one year 50cent increase AND do a summer legislative study on the subject of livable income. This proved to be pivotal because that summer study led to the Legislature coming to “own” the basic needs budget and livable wage issue in a much deeper way, and was followed by multi-year minimum wage increases, a significant bump in the Earned Income Tax Credit for low income working Vermonters, and eventually an annual COLA adjusted minimum wage – one of only 2 in the country.

I was also mentored along the way by progressive business leaders like **Lisa Lorimer, Kevin Harper, Pat Heffernan and Lawrence Miller**. And since being at the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, the support of **Chuck Ross** has had a huge impact on what we have been able to accomplish.

Of course, the work of the VSJF only succeeds because of my incredible co-workers: **Janice St. Onge, Scott Sawyer, John Ryan, Erica Campbell, Jake Claro, Stephanie Smith, Rachel Carter, and Anthony Mennona**. They are so talented and dedicated and I am thankful for the privilege to get to work with them.

I want to thank a number of key funders in the room as well, not only for nominating me for this award but for believing so much in the work we do at the VSJF --- **Gaye Symington** (High Meadows Fund), **Christine James** (John Merck Fund), **Courtney Bournes** (Henry P. Kendall Foundation), and all the staff and fund holders at the VCF.

And of course, just like Con's life and work would have been greatly diminished without his partnership with Jeanette, so too am I so very thankful for my relationship with my wife **Susanna**.

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And now a few thoughts about our shared future. Con's passion has been about the quality of the human condition from a social service perspective.

My passion has also been about the quality of the human condition, although from an economic perspective.

We've both come at our respective work by trying to change systems and structures. The longer I do this work, the more convinced I am that we need to change the very foundation of our society and culture. Fundamentally, we need to build a culture of care, kindness, abundance and connection, rather than perpetuating a culture of indifference, fear, scarcity and disconnection.

Cultivating a culture of kindness requires us to understand a fundamental truth – that we are interdependent. My life and leadership has been dependent upon many causes and conditions and people who have informed and influenced me, loved me and opened doors for me over the years.

Let's face it, we ultimately all want the same simple thing out of life – to be happy. What enables real happiness in our lives? Loving others and feeling loved by others, feeling a connection to others and to place, feeling worthy to be a human being, having the confidence that you can live your life with dignity and make a contribution to your family and community. In short – happiness is generated when we get off 'the me plan' and get on with 'the we plan' as [Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche](#) likes to say.

Con, Cheryl, and really all of you in this room exemplify living and working in this way. Sometimes the 'we plan' is hard to focus on because we are facing a lot of uncertainty. Climate change, shrinking state budgets and rising health care and social safety net costs, increasing opiate addiction, physical – mental – sexual abuse, random mass shootings, the largest income inequality we've ever faced as a nation. There are so many other issues I could name and it's easy to feel despair.

I invite you to consider how our culture of fear and greed has been built and what this has led to. And then think about the desire we all have to be happy and to live from a place of hope and optimism for the future. What will most enable that? Will a culture of fear and greed lead us to be happy or to solve the incredibly complex challenges we face as a species today? Or do we need a culture of kindness to help us get to happiness and a feeling of all-rightness.

I think we need to have a conversation about re-defining wealth in this country. We need to shift the definition of wealth from a level of accumulated money to a feeling of well-being. A feeling that you have “enough.” What would that take? What would the metrics be to gauge kindness, care and enough-ness in our society?

Just think about it, if a person has a sense of well-being and “enough-ness” and lives in a culture that reinforces this, then that person will want that same feeling of “enough-ness” for others. It just works that way. How might that affect our societal structures? Our human services system, our economic system, and how we treat and interact with the planet and other beings who call earth home?

I’m posing these ideas and big questions to you – this room full of my mentors, colleagues and friends – because I have experienced you embracing and encouraging OUR inter-dependence over the past 25 years. As Vermonters, we are well on our way towards creating this culture of kindness, human dignity, and caring for others and our planet. The question is, how do we expand this so that there are more of us living and acting this way?

Whether your view is from a social service, economic, environmental or other perspective, remember the power you possess to affect real change. Within each moment contains the possibility that our actions can be sufficient to shift the scales towards kindness, equity, inclusion, and happiness.

Again, thank you VERY much for this award and recognition. I hope I can live into Con’s legacy over the next 25 years.