



Oct. 19, 2015

Installation Remarks for Smithsonian Secretary David Skorton

“Magic”

Imagine...

Makayla is 9 years old, smart, inquisitive, serious and sometimes silly. A native Washingtonian, she likes going to the National Zoo with her parents and on school trips. She has always been fascinated by the pandas and was thrilled when Bei Bei was born. She cannot believe that Shanthi the Asian elephant can play the harmonica, but she loves the pandas the most. She wants to know more about endangered species and what can be done to help them. Her parents explain why plant, animal and marine life is important to the health of everyone on the planet. When they tell her about the female scientists from the Zoo who helped make Bei Bei and Bao Bao’s births possible, Makayla’s eyes light up. The spark is there. There is no telling what Makayla will accomplish as an adult.

Jorge is a millennial living at home in Brooklyn, helping his parents with his younger siblings. He is the first in his family to attend college. His passion to change the world was ignited when he saw the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum’s “Design with the Other 90%: Cities” exhibition on a school field trip and learned that 1 billion people live in slums now, a number that could rise to 2 billion by 2030. Many lack housing, sanitation, water and electricity. Then he saw some of the practical solutions documented in the exhibition: the digital drum, the bike modules, the sandbag house—and he thought, “I can do that. I can help.” He returns to Cooper Hewitt frequently; he loves our digital pen.

Bob met his wife Ann in 1970. Severely wounded in Vietnam, Bob was evacuated to the Navy hospital ship Sanctuary in the South China Sea. Ann, a nurse, helped save his life. Genuine gratitude led to real romance. Decades later, they still take an annual ride on their motorcycle from Jacksonville, N.C., to Washington, D.C., for Memorial Day and Rolling Thunder. Sharing the driving duties, they stop at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and then visit our National Museum of American History to see “The Price of Freedom: Americans at War” exhibition. Back home, they volunteer to talk to

veterans at the VA hospital and their local VFW Hall. Historical perspective gives them a way to discuss tough topics such as dissent and free speech, honor and courage, war and peace, life and death.

You, my colleagues at the Smithsonian, make the magic happen for these four people—and so many others. You help create connections among people, artifacts and ideas that result in moments that can only be described as magical. Those tens of millions who every year visit our museums are transformed, as I was as a young boy when my parents took me to our nation’s capital and the National Museum of Natural History. By word of mouth and now through digital connections, your work has a profound impact on visitors, scholars, educators and learners of all ages throughout the world. Though they may not see each of you as clearly as they see the exhibitions you create, your scholarship, devotion, imagination, drive and courage—whether you are a scientist, artist, conservator, custodian, curator, volunteer, art historian, astrophysicist, security officer, carpenter, administrator—make the magic happen.

I am honored and humbled to serve as your 13th Secretary. I am here because my father and his family emigrated from Russia to seek a new life in the United States. And, decades later, I am privileged to work with all of you—and each of you—to tell the story of America, here and beyond.

I am here to spread the word about the riches we offer the nation and the world in art, science, history and culture—vast, varied collections of treasures from the Star-Spangled Banner to the Space Shuttle Discovery. But most of all, I am here because of you, my Smithsonian colleagues.

You continue to break new ground in astrophysics, climate change, modern art, American history, genomics, biodiversity, Asian and African art, flight and outer space, immigration and identity, and so much more. Through your research, publications, public programs, dedication, creativity, loyalty and determination, you educate, enlighten and inspire millions.

If you ever doubt that you make a difference, come in from the field, get out of the lab, leave the library and walk around our museums, galleries and National Zoo, and talk with and listen to the visitors.

Be bold—the times demand it; I believe in you.

And so does everyone in this historic building. The Chancellor of the Smithsonian, Chief Justice Roberts, our Board of Regents, the Smithsonian National Board, members of Congress, neighbors, Washingtonians, all our boards, our generous donors, they all believe in you. We know, of course, that we cannot do it alone.

As Secretary for a few months now, I realize more than ever what a tremendous job Wayne Clough, the 12th Secretary of the Smithsonian, did. Thanks to him, we are on a firm foundation.

And to prove the Smithsonian talent pool is deep, Al Horvath stepped in as Acting Secretary and led us with distinction without skipping a beat; many thanks to him as well.

On a personal note, I thank my wife, Dr. Robin Davisson, for taking this journey with me. When a call came about this job, and I expressed doubts about whether I was the right guy, she urged me to go for it. And I thank my son, Josh, and daughter-in-law, Emily, for their love, encouragement and support.

I am glad I did go for it, even as I recognize that we have work to do and that times are tough. We face national and global challenges that cry out for the arts, social sciences and humanities to act side-by-side with the life sciences and physical sciences. There are so many challenges:

- Climate change: We live in the age of the Anthropocene, the “Age of Humans,” so-called because we have such an enormous impact on our planet.
- Social turmoil: It has been a year of storms in our cities—what does it mean to be an American today? How do we understand the cultural and historical context?
- Global competition and conflict: There are hot spots around the world where ancient civilizations and modern values are colliding.

To meet these challenges, we must do a better job of educating the next generation—and the next. As Thomas Jefferson wrote Jan. 6, 1816, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

We must and we will educate, enlighten and ignite the spark of lifetime learning. How might we do that?

- How do we expand pathways to knowledge?
- How can we be a force for change in the world?
- How do we help the U.S. maintain its global leadership?

I believe that, within a few years, there will be three categories of workers in America: knowledge workers, service workers and robots. Yes, the knowledge workers of tomorrow, in addition to formal education at our P–12 schools and our great institutions of higher learning, will benefit from ongoing inspiration and education through the constantly evolving Smithsonian. And we must constantly evolve.

Your work, colleagues, in a constantly evolving Smithsonian, will be ever more critical—informing and inspiring young children as well as individuals as ancient as this Smithsonian Secretary. Understanding through the arts, humanities, social sciences and natural sciences is the prerequisite for a nuanced perspective on the myriad challenges and opportunities we face together.

The stories we tell promote American values, and how we tell the stories exemplifies American values. I urge you to continue to tell the stories boldly, to tell them in full—the proud and the less proud aspects of our heritage. As do all great institutions, the Smithsonian must find that delicate balance between reinventing ourselves, understanding and meeting the desires of each new generation and doing so while upholding our enduring values and our mission: “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.” And, as we do it, we can, to quote the poet Seamus Heaney, create moments, when “hope and history rhyme.”

The fate of our planet is at stake. In the classroom, the kitchen, the studio, the community and the country, Smithsonian people have—and we will—get it done.

How best to move forward? After 15 weeks on the job here, I wish to share some observations:

- As you all know, our staff is stretched thin. It is time to bolster the ranks.
 - I will seek public recognition for exemplary effort on your part.
- We must focus ever more on the arts and humanities in our description of the magic, in our planning and in our philanthropic efforts, and recognize the science of art and the art of science.
 - Building upon our success in science, we will launch cross-disciplinary initiatives from the grassroots and foster collaboration.
- We will recognize ever more clearly that our reach is and should be worldwide—in each of the 145 countries where we work and all the rest. Of course, millions visit us from countries around the world. But I believe we must represent American values far beyond the National Mall or New York City. We represent to the world American values, what we stand for in word and action. We must interact even more directly with our neighbors around the globe. In these times of terrible and terrifying anger and conflict, we must stand up for the preservation of other countries’ cultures and, as you have done for so many years, work fearlessly to preserve cultural heritage that would otherwise be wantonly destroyed and lost forever.

How will this all play out? I do not know—exactly. I would not pretend to know—exactly. But I do know that we will find out together. I believe in the wisdom of this crowd. That is why I promise you today and every day forward that I will listen and learn from you. I will champion your important work. I will fight for funding. I will encourage risk-taking and support you in times of controversy. I will prod you to think big, then think bigger—as big and bold as a *T. rex* hunting for food.

And if we all do that, working together, the magic will multiply.

My father was forever grateful for the opportunities he and my family found in America. He always wanted me to do something to serve America. This is my golden opportunity. I know that. I assure you, I will give it my all.

Be proud of what you do. We serve this country in myriad ways, and it is a privilege to do so. I know you will never settle for the status quo. We are not here for that. Our country, and others around the world, look to us for insight and inspiration. We will deliver, as we always have...to Makayla, Jorge, Bob and Ann, and millions of others. We are so fortunate to be the custodians of the greatest treasures of the greatest nation on Earth. Let us find more and better ways to share them, to understand their significance, to inform, to inspire, to make this world better—a lot better.

Thank you.

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