

**Excerpts from Speech by Sen. Kathleen Vinehout, D-Alma,
at Health Care Forum in Viroqua
Sponsored by Wisconsin Health Justice Campaign and Wisconsin Farmers
Union
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Ten and a half years ago – after only six months as a rookie senator - I found myself at the center of the health care reform debate in Wisconsin.

When I ran for the State Senate I was an uninsured dairy farmer. I spent almost ten years milking cows. Like many farmers, health insurance became more expensive than any other farm cost except for cattle feed. We made the impossible choice of going without coverage.

I know first-hand what it feels like to be without insurance; the embarrassment, the fear, the blame. You lie awake at night worrying about what happens if someone you love has an accident. Or your child wakes up sick.

Six weeks before the election my worst fears were realized. I was attending a union meeting when I received a call. My son had been taken to the emergency room and required immediate surgery. His appendix ruptured.

Cold fear went through my veins. My mouth went dry. I couldn't speak.

A total of \$15,000 and three scars later, my son was fine. But we had to take out a second mortgage on the farm to pay the hospital bills.

With that experience fresh in my mind, I began my new role of Senator and faced an incredible opportunity.

Senator Judy Robson – then the Majority Leader of the Senate – charged a few Senate Democrats - Senators Mark Miller, Jon Erpanbach, and myself - with crafting a state-wide health care reform proposal.

For ten years I taught health policy at the University of Illinois, Springfield. Every policy professor's dream is to create the policy about which they teach. That dream was coming true.

We spent six months pouring over details of what worked in other states and countries. In June of 2007 we unveiled Healthy Wisconsin – a plan to bring the same health care I had as a Senator to every child, woman and man in Wisconsin.

Quickly the spin machine of the anti-reformers rose up to oppose us.

I was a prime target for the opposition; a neophyte Senator who spent two years without health insurance. My family and I were attacked in the Milwaukee media. I was accused of “willful negligence” for not insuring my son. We were attacked as “liberal academics masquerading as farmers” - as if anyone could run a dairy farm part-time. The Republican Leader of the Assembly called me a “socialist”. I responded, “Ever since 1906 when Teddy Roosevelt first proposed health care reform, health care reformers have been called socialists.”

“Socialist” was the accusation made of many before him - those who courageously fought for fair wages, the eight-hour day and a safe workplace free of discrimination.

Be mindful of the tactics used by those who oppose health care for all.

The tactics used to fight health care reform are familiar:

appear as if you support it;
pour money into negative public relations campaigns and lobbying;
fight behind the scenes every step of the way;
use front groups of ideologues to do your dirty work; and
use personal attacks to discredit reformers.

In the 2008 campaign, these tactics were against every Democrat. The opposition charged Democrats with increasing taxes by \$15 billion. They blamed every Democrat for supporting Healthy Wisconsin. Never mind the fact that NO Democrat in the Wisconsin Assembly had ever voted for it. Never mind the fact that Democratic challengers could not have voted for it because they had never voted for anything!

And never mind the fact that changing the way health care was paid for would save billions – a fact the opposition never mentioned.

But dark pictures of aliens climbing fences at night were used to drill home the message “ILLEGAL ALIENS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE HEALTH CARE CRISIS”

THE STORY OF TOMMY DOUGLAS

Fear of the waves of illegal aliens is not a new tactic to scare us out of health care reform. I recently read a biography of Eleanor Roosevelt. During the 30’s California proposed a health care system. Those who attacked and destroyed the proposal threatened that waves and waves of illegal aliens would flock to California.

About that same time, Tommy Douglas, a Calvary Baptist minister in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, decided to give up his church and run for the House of Commons. Tommy saw the people suffering because of the drought and the Great Depression. Families could not afford to see a doctor. Tommy buried the young men of his congregation who died because they could not afford to go to the hospital. They left no one behind to care for their families.

Tommy joined the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, the socialist democratic party. He campaigned for social justice, fair farm prices, collective bargaining and health care for all. Later he became the Premier of Saskatchewan. Tommy created a program to provide free hospital care to all citizens – the beginnings of what is now known as Canadian Medicare.

In the summer of 1962, Saskatchewan became the hot-bed of health care reform. The American Medical Association joined their Canadian colleagues to organize a Saskatchewan doctors strike. The doctors raised the fear of ‘government run health care’.

Ads ran on television raising the specter that ‘The Government’ would come between doctors and patients. Doctors claimed ‘The Government’ would import foreign doctors and used racist images to scare the public.

These ads were remarkably similar to the ads used against President Obama and passage of the Affordable Care Act.

Tommy was not even Premier when the new Medicare program was finally implemented. But his success spread to Ottawa. By 1966, the federal government encouraged other provinces to adopt the Saskatchewan Medicare.

Tommy worked for 26 years to pass the Medicare system in Saskatchewan. But, it took only four additional years to be adopted by the whole country. For Tommy, the victory was his greatest legacy.

This man, who was attacked, lost an election and had his campaign headquarters destroyed, was voted in 2004 as the Greatest Canadian of all time.

I mulled over all this when I returned to Madison last January. I thought about the obstacles conquered by those who came before, and I thought about the obstacles we face in Wisconsin.

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In 2008, Democrats took control of the Wisconsin Assembly for the first time in 14 years.

But all of them had been so beat up by attacks on health care reform, no one had the stomach to take up the banner again.

In an effort to re-energize my legislative colleagues on the issue of health care reform, I drafted five bills that provided steps forward.

Wisconsin had some of the most lax health insurance regulations in the country. Worse than Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, states that often occupy the bottom of rankings. When it came to the individual insurance market and pre-existing conditions, Wisconsin had no rules on the egregious practice of allowing companies to 'look back' in a person's medical record and say, 'Judy, you SHOULD HAVE KNOWN you were going to develop heart disease after that high cholesterol test you had ten years ago. Therefore, we are going to deny your claim for the bills from the heart attack you just had. No, sorry it doesn't matter that you paid you premium on time for the past twenty years.

My five-point insurance reform plan targeted the most egregious practices of the insurance industry. While my plan made small steps forward, it was also achievable. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel called the work I was able to pass the "most significant insurance reform in a decade".

I paid close attention to the passage of the Affordable Care Act and, after it became law, immediately introduced a bill to create a Wisconsin-run marketplace like Minnesota's MNsure. I've re-introduced some version of this bill in four separate legislative sessions.

When Gov Walker took office, he repealed some of the changes I made in 2009 to protect people from insurance companies' worst practices. Allowing adult children to stay on your policy until they are 27 years of age, protections for those with pre-existing conditions, getting rid of life time limits on insurance. He also dissolved the state's high-risk pool – a state run program that did a remarkable job, despite some problems, of helping those who could not get insurance.

This week, the governor gave his state of the state address. In a complete reversal of his earlier actions, he challenged the legislature to pass some version of protection for pre-existing conditions and create a high-risk pool. Never mentioning, of course, that if he had left things alone, we'd already have what he is asking for.

Looking forward, as we work together to bring health care to everyone, there are four things I would suggest that we keep in mind.

### **Words Matter**

Health care for all is an obligation we all have for each other in a civilized society.

Think for a moment what this phrase means and how it is different than “health care is a right”.

A “right” implies something I deserve. In a democracy, I –as part of being a citizen – have the right to vote. The democracy gives me that right. I have the obligation to be an engaged, thoughtful and active citizen or I will lose the democracy and lose my rights.

Health care, also, is a right a civilized society bestows on its members. But with that right is the obligation – or responsibility if you will – that ALL Of US work to make sure EVERYONE else has health care. Everything we’ve been talking about today. Access, high quality, preventive services, portability, comprehensive care, universality – everyone is covered.

Too often, I hear folks say, Health care is my right. As if the state should turn over to ME what is MINE. But the obligation I have to you is missed in this statement. The obligation all of us have to each other to hear the cries of those who are less well off than us is left out.

### **Know who or what is our enemy**

Don’t assume that anyone who doesn’t say the magic words “I support Single Payer” doesn’t want to achieve universal health care.

The enemy is not each other. We are not on this earth as US and THEM. We are all on a journey together.

The REAL enemies are hatred, ignorance and ideology.

I have seen the last, ideology, responsible for more disturbances to people’s lives than single person. If you call out the enemy – the ideology, the ignorance, the hatred, this leaves open the door for making peace and harmony with the person.

### **Know when we ARE making progress.**

The Affordable Care Act was not what I wanted. For many reasons I saw problems ahead. But there were many parts of the ACA that DID move us forward – Increasing coverage, eliminating pre-existing conditions and life-time limits, and allowing adult children to stay on their parents’ policy.

And other parts of the ACA we’ve forgotten, or never known about – closing the “doughnut hole in the drug coverage for Medicare – part D; covering preventive care; and funding federal research on what medical procedures and devices are both efficacious and cost effective – something very necessary to controlling costs.

When a policy moves us towards any of the following goals, we ARE making progress:

- Universality – everyone is covered;
- Portability- you can take it with you;
- Accessibility – you don't have to drive 2 hours to get to a hospital or a clinic;
- Comprehensive Coverage - includes mental health and drug addiction;
- Public Oversight – the government plays a role in keeping things fair.

**Tell your story from the heart.**

Over and again, I have seen lawmakers' minds changed by stories.

The story opposes ignorance, ideology and hatred.

The story reminds us of love and compassion. The story open our minds and our eyes.

The story reminds us, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

Minds are opened when we touch each other as humans. We are naturally attracted to stories. Think of how the phrase LOVE IS LOVE changed attitudes about same sex marriage.

The road is long.

We are all on a journey together.

Each of us has a story to tell.

Each of us has a role to play.

Each of us has each other.

We will get to the end of the road.

We will achieve universal health care.