

Go Forward! A Call to Action

September 12, 2009

Every day Glen works with one hand pressed against his abdomen to keep his intestines from coming out through a hernia. He also has trouble walking because of his bad knees. Glen hasn't been to a doctor in five years. He called my office a few weeks ago and asked me for help.

A Saturday before, Mark called me at home. Mark is from Arcadia; a dairy farmer who milks 115 cows. Mark's insurance company notified him they were going to raise his rates \$600 a month. He was already paying \$3,800 a month for health insurance. Mark was unlucky enough to have suffered two heart attacks.

Every day I hear health care stories.

I hear how people who lost their job also lost their health insurance; how people unlucky enough to have 'pre-existing' conditions paid nearly their entire income for insurance; how people who faithfully paid premiums for many years have their policies dropped because they get sick.

Glen, the fellow with the hernia, is a small business owner; he had insurance. But he could only afford a high deductible plan. Conservative would tell us these high deductible plans are the answer to our health care crisis. But Glen told me he can't afford to pay the high deductible because business is down and times are tight. He can't afford to see a doctor so every day he suffers.

Mark suffers in a different way. The pain of knowing you already had two heart attacks and might suffer another is difficult enough. But when every single dime you earn goes to insurance. Then the price of milk drops to half of what it was and you can't cover your costs and support your family. Faced with dropping insurance coverage which puts the family farm at risk or not being able to buy groceries is Mark's impossible choice.

What the insurance company was doing was raising Mark's rates so high he was forced to drop the insurance. The industry calls it 'purging'. A disgusting word for a despicable practice.

The same thing happened to a small business in Western Wisconsin. Two of the forty employees were unlucky enough to get sick this year. The company now faces a premium increase of 47%.

These stories reveal the effect of deliberate policies by insurance companies. So do the tactics used to fight health care reform: appear as if you support it; pour money into 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.

Two years ago - 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 Mark, health insurance became more expensive than any other farm cost except for cattle feed. So we made the impossible choice of going without coverage.

I know first hand what it feels like; the embarrassment, the fear, the blame. You lay 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 refinance the farm to pay the hospital bills.

Not every family would have the equity in the farm to pay the 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 the Senate Democrats on the Health Committee - Senators Mark Miller, Jon Erpanbach, Tim Carpenter and me - with crafting a state-wide health care reform proposal.

For ten years I taught health policy at the University of Illinois in 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 Leader of the Assembly called me a “socialist”. I responded, “It’s only been since 1906 when Teddy Roosevelt first proposed health care reform that health care reformers were 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.

The benefits we take for granted today came about because of the blood, tears and sacrifice of those who came before us. One of my heroes, whose example gave me strength during our fight for health care reform, was a woman named Mary Harris. Most of you probably remember her as “Mother Jones.”

THE STORY OF MOTHER JONES

Born in Ireland in 1830, Mary immigrated to America when she was five. By age 37, she lost her husband, George Jones, and four children to a yellow fever epidemic. She moved to Chicago where four years later she lost everything she owned in the Great Chicago Fire. She truly was a woman with “nothing left to lose.”

In her autobiography she wrote, “Those were the days of sacrifice for the cause of labor.”

In the late nineteenth century, houses were warmed by coal mined by miners who were virtually slaves to the Company. Fourteen-hour work days were common and wages were kept at the bare minimum. The miners were paid in scrip, not cash, which could only be used at the Company store – where prices were inflated. The Company owned the shacks and land where miner’s families lived. The Company owned the schools, the churches and the roads leading to the mine.

When the miners began using a strike to force better working conditions and pay, the Company took their homes and possessions leaving the workers without protection. Tent cities sprung up around the mine during a strike.

Standing barely five feet tall Mother Jones became a common sight among the miners and their families. They called her the “angel of the miners.” She traveled across the country to organize for better working conditions. She organized the men, she organized the women and in one strike, she even organized the mules in the mine.

She watched impoverished mothers agonize over sending their children to labor in the mines and the textile mills. Mother Jones wrote, *“Little girls and boys, barefooted, walked up and down the endless rows of spindles reaching thin little hands into the machinery to repair snapped threads. They crawled under the machinery to oil it. They replaced spindles all day long,..tiny babies of six years old with faces of sixty did an eight hour shift for ten cents a day. If they fell asleep, cold water was dashed on their faces.*

Mother Jones organized a group of children, some of them maimed from working in the Pennsylvania textile mills, to President Teddy Roosevelt's home to dramatize the case for abolishing child labor. But when laws protecting children were passed in Pennsylvania, critics called the laws "job killers."

They called Mother Jones "the most dangerous woman in America"

In River Falls, during a presentation I gave on Healthy Wisconsin, I overheard a physician, a specialist, in the back of the room say of me, "She is a dangerous woman."

I thought of Mother Jones. I knew I was making a difference.

So I whispered to myself: **Go Forward.**

In the 2008 campaign, the Republicans used Healthy Wisconsin against every Democrat. They charged Democrats with increasing taxes by \$15 billion. 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.

And never mind the fact that changing the way health care was paid for would save billions – a fact they 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"

By the time we returned to Madison, the Democrats took control of the Wisconsin Assembly for the first time in 14 years.

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

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 waves and waves of illegal aliens coming 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 feared ‘government run health care’. Ads ran on television creating fear 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.

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. Although it took Tommy 26 years to pass the Medicare system in Saskatchewan, it took a mere four years to be adopted by the 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, Mother Jones, Eleanor and Tommy and I thought about the obstacles we face in Wisconsin. In an effort to re-energize my legislative colleagues on the issue of health care reform, I drafted five bills that provided steps forward.

Did you know Wisconsin has 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 comes 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 immediately achievable. In fact the Governor, who opposed Healthy Wisconsin, saw the wisdom of my plan and he put it into the state budget. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel called it the “most significant insurance reform in a decade”. The plan is now law in the state of Wisconsin. Just like Mississippi and Alabama.

THE STORY OF DR. KING

It was in Alabama - Montgomery, Alabama - in September 1955 that a weary Rosa Parks decided she would rather go to jail than give up her seat on the city bus.

There was a new, young preacher at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church by the name of Martin Luther King Jr.

When the Montgomery Bus strike needed a spokesman, local community leaders asked Martin to lead. He reluctantly agreed. The bus strike dragged on; for weeks, for months. Martin was arrested twice and his house was bombed. His wife, Coretta and nine-week-old daughter were inside.

But Dr. King did not give up. **“Go Forward.”** He told his people. The Montgomery Bus Boycott continued.

Finally – over a year later – The Supreme Court ruled it was illegal to discriminate on city buses. The bus strike was over and new movement began.

Martin wrote a book about his experience in Alabama. At a book signing in Harlem, Dr. King was stabbed in the chest by a demented woman. His closest friends told how this wound later reminded Martin everyday as he got dressed that this day could be his last. This realization gave him intensity about everything he did.

Martin thought and operated as an organizer. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was formed to organize non-violent protest activities, had as its backbone the Black churches. But Martin went everywhere – to the pool halls – wherever he could find people. In his own words he said, “It’s a hard, it’s a tedious job. To rouse people from their apathy.” But rouse them he did.

In Selma, Dr. King tried to convince the adults to join in a peaceful march for voting rights. The people were apathetic, but mostly, they were afraid. So he went to the schools and encouraged the young people to join in the march. Go Forward, he told them.

And the kids marched. White people joined them. Fifty-four miles they marched from Selma to Montgomery. Thousands joined the marchers on the steps of the Capitol. President Johnson compared the Selma march to those of patriots in the Revolutionary War. The Voting Rights bill was unveiled to Congress and the nation.

Rosa Parks’ act of courage happened in 1955. It was nine years later the Civil Rights Act passed and ten before the Voting Rights Act passed. Martin never gave up. He told the people:

“If you can’t fly, run. If you can’t run, walk. If you can’t walk, crawl. But by all means Keep Moving.” **AND GO FORWARD**

THE STORY OF STONEWALL

Martin never knew all those he inspired.

It was 1969 in an unremarkable little gay bar on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village called the 'Stonewall Inn'. Seven plain clothes police officers entered the bar; asked for IDs and threw patrons in a paddy wagon. But the patrons decided they were not going to go. For the first time they started to fight back.

The officers called for back up from the Tactical Patrol Force. Two dozen 'massively proportioned' riot police linked arms Roman Legion style to push back the protesters; they beat the protesters with clubs.

The protesters disbanded but organized again down the street behind the police. By now hundreds of people from the neighborhood had gathered. When the riot police whirled around they found themselves face to face with their worst nightmare:

a chorus of mocking queens, their arms clasped around each other, kicking their heels Rockettes-Style and singing at the top of their voices "we are the Stonewall girls, we wear our hair in curls...we wear our dungarees, above our nelly knees."

The following evening the demonstrators returned. Their numbers swelled to thousands. Leaflets were handed out. Protests continued. And the leaders of the new gay rights movement yelled to the group;

"GO FORWARD."

THE CONCLUSION

When Yahweh called the Israelites out of Egypt and they were standing at the Red Sea with the Egyptian Army hot on their heels. Moses didn't say to the people "I think I went too far. Let's go back." He said to the people, **"GO FORWARD!"**

When Mother Jones led her "boys" into the strikes against the Mining Company, she didn't say, "I made the Company angry. Let's go back to the boarding house." She said, "Pray for the Dead and Fight Like Hell for the Living!" She told her 'boys': **"GO FORWARD."**

When Tommy Douglas faced crowds of people, organized by doctors from the American Medical Association, to stop the new Saskatchewan Medicare, Tommy didn't give up. He didn't back down. He said to the people of Saskatchewan **"GO FORWARD."**

When Martin Luther King, Jr. faced hundreds of angry white men in the city of Birmingham run by the bigot Bull Conner; when he led the people from Selma Alabama to Montgomery. After children had been attacked by dogs and fire hoses, he didn't say, "The time isn't right, I think I'll go back." He said to the people, **"GO FORWARD."**

And when a line of drag queens on Christopher Street linked arms and started to sing, they didn't give up; even though they most surely were afraid; they said, **“GO FORWARD!”**

And so you, my Progressive Sisters and Brothers, when you hear the lies and innuendos about health care reform; when you see articles that willfully misread and intentionally mischaracterize; when you view the multimillion dollar marketing campaign; when you are confronted about the “evils” of ‘government-run health care’ by the people who themselves benefit.

Tell them the truth.

Tell them the government already pays at least half the health care bill in the US. And for that amount every other industrialized nation in the world can provide good health care to ALL its people.

Tell them the truth.

That they are being manipulated by a multi billion-dollar industry that wants to keep its huge profits and it's fancy corporate jets at the expense of our suffering friends and neighbors.

Tell them the truth.

Tell them the stories of Glen and Mark. Tell them of the people you know and love, who are already rationed out of the health care system, because they are unlucky enough to get sick; or work for a company that chose a “consumer driven’ health care plan.

Ladies and Gentlemen. Leaders of our Progressive Movement. Remember for a moment why we are here. Why we breathe and have our being on this earth.

When all is said and done and we lay our heads to rest...

Is there only one single question to ask?

What have we done for the least among us?

Is there not a more compelling reason to bring health care reform to every child, woman and man in this country?

Did we realize the dream of Sen. Kennedy for an America where the state of a family's health will never again depend on the amount of a family's wealth?

So, I say to you. When you are tired of writing letters to your Congressional leaders; when you have talked to your neighbors and your friends; when you have dispelled every

lie and misconception; when you joined marches; prepared posters and made phone calls; when you are weary and feel you can not go on...

Remember the words of Dr. King, "I don't determine what is right or wrong by taking a Gallop poll of public opinion of the majority opinion. A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus, but he is a molder of consensus."

Then remember the strength and nerve of all of those gathered here today. Remember the people you know who are suffering. Remember the power you have to mold consensus;

And GO FORWARD!