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ANNUAL CONFERENCE



John W. Gardner Leadership Dinner

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Emcee:

- DEBBIE DINGELL, co-chair, Annual Conference Host Committee

Presenter:

- MARGUERITE KONDRACKE, IS board member, president and CEO of America's Promise Alliance, and chair of 2009 John W. Gardner Leadership Award Committee

John W. Gardner Leadership Awardee:

- GEOFFREY CANADA, president and CEO, Harlem Children's Zone

ANNOUNCER: Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome back to the stage, Debbie Dingell.

MS. DINGELL: Did everybody have a good dinner? The talking is continuing. The dialogue is going on. We like you to dish in Detroit. I hope you did have a good meal and a great conversation, but before turning to the Gardner Award portion of the program, I'd like to take a moment to recognize those individuals and organizations whose generous support has helped make this evening wonderful.

Have you all had a wonderful evening so far?

[Applause.]

MS. DINGELL: So I want you to thank our sponsors tonight. Stanley Druckenmiller and the Harlem Children's Zone Board of Trustees.

[Applause.]

MS. DINGELL: And Target. And Target. Let's hear some enthusiasm. You're in Detroit.

[Applause.]

MS. DINGELL: I don't let people get quiet or bored. It's not good. Passion at all times.

And just a quick mention that through the support of Mr. Druckenmiller and the HCZ Board of Trustees, we are fortunate to have with us tonight a group of Harlem Children Zone team members,

the people who each and every day are dedicated to improving and uplifting the lives of others. We applaud your commitment, and we thank you for being here.

And would you stand, so we can all see you and give you an

[Applause, cheering.]

MS. DINGELL: That's great.

It is a special honor to be part of presenting the 2009 John W. Gardner Leadership Award to Geoffrey Canada, a leader whose work has been both so meaningful and so very inspirational.

To tell you more about the award, it is my pleasure to call to the podium, Marguerite Kondracke, IS Board Member, President and CEO of America's Promise Alliance, and the chair of the 2009 John W. Gardner Leadership Award Committee.

Marguerite?

[Applause.]

MS. KONDRACKE: Thanks, everyone, and thank you, Debbie, for being such a great co hostess for all of us, and good evening again.

It is truly my pleasure and a very real and deep honor to be allowed to present the 2009 John W. Gardner Leadership Award.

This marks the twenty sixth time that the Independent Sector will confer the John W. Gardner Leadership Award. It was established in 1985, and the award honors extraordinary individuals who, in their own way, exemplify the leadership and the ideals of John W. Gardner, the founding chairperson of the Independent Sector.

John Gardner was a man of so many admirable qualities, among them great consciences, great intellect, and to the great benefit of us all, John Gardner not only thought big thoughts, but he acted on them in expansive, truly impactful fashion.

John Gardner worked tirelessly to bring his dreams and ideas to life and in making it possible for all of us to work together and to collaborate for the common good.

So let me acknowledge an organization that has made it possible for us to remember John W. Gardner and to honor yet another extraordinary information.

I want to thank the William Randolph Hearst Foundations for their continued commitment to recognizing outstanding sector leadership and the incredible contributions that the people of our sector bring to individuals and communities across this nation and around the world.

Mason, please stand so we can say thank you.

[Applause.]

MS. KONDRACKE: I also very much appreciate the great work that my committee did. The John W. Gardner Leadership Award Committee works hard. We review and evaluate the many wonderful nominations submitted throughout the year. There's a great deal of serious deliberation, a great deal of thought, and real commitment to finding just the right person that honors John Gardner's ideals and embodies the spirit.

And, surely, we have come to appreciate how very special this award is, and the board just recently made a renewed commitment to continue this honor and to be sure that we can find a truly extraordinary human being that embodies John Gardner's spirit and represents that kind of leadership for our entire sector.

We looked for somebody who symbolizes the strength of our sector, the very best within ourselves, someone who is a role model through his or her own example but also has blazed a trail and has inspired the work of others, looks forward with continuing zest and energy to making the world a better place by example, by actions, by inspiration.

And this year's John W. Gardner Leadership Award recipient, Geoffrey Canada, is truly such a leader. It's especially a privilege for me personally to have this role tonight, to have the chance to honor Geoff, because he has long been an inspiration to so many of us who work to strengthen the lives and the future for our most vulnerable children.

Geoff's unique campaign to combat generational poverty is truly making a difference in the lives of those children and families he touches in Harlem and in the lives of the children and families he touches by inspiration throughout this country.

Geoff has long held a firm belief that children anywhere and everywhere can succeed and that education would play a key role in that success. What he encountered in his initial work, however, was mounting frustrations. He saw that programs were being provided to help children escape the cycle of poverty, but they were too narrow in their focus, and they served too few children in the community. He knew and deeply believed there had to be a better way, and we know that children don't live in program silos. They live in families, and they live in neighborhoods.

And so was born the Harlem Children's Zone, a comprehensive community based approach that focuses on the health, the social, the educational development of children within the context of the family and the community where they live.

The project started 10 years ago on a small scale, and by last year, Harlem Children's Zone provided innovative, efficient programs in a one-hundred block area, helping to improve the lives of nearly 11,000 children and 6,000 adults, but the countless lives that that inspiration has touched are too numerous to number, and we don't know their names or the numbers.

Geoffrey Canada has been an inspiration to so many, and it is under his leadership and because of his leadership at the Harlem Children's Zone that this has been chosen as a national model. And President Obama has praised the Harlem Children's Zone since he announced his own Presidential bid and has pledged to export the group's approach to other parts of the country.

Obama has proposed spending 10 million next fiscal year on planning grants to help nonprofit groups create what he has called "Promise Neighborhoods" in 20 cities, including Detroit, and it's wonderful that tonight's honor coincides with this very next week because Geoff Canada is going to play host to 1,400 people who will come to Harlem in their bid to make their community a Promise Neighborhood.

Geoff has also seen his work, the focus of a myriad of media attention. Sterling Speirn and I were remembering we read about him on the cover of a New York Times magazine many years ago; more recently, The Today Show, the Oprah Winfrey Show, 60 Minutes, multiple appearances even on The Colbert Report.

[Laughter.]

MS. KONDRACKE: And you know you've made it when you're on The Colbert Report.

And then there was this thoughtful profile with Soledad O'Brien as part of CNN's landmark documentary, "Black in America."

[Video clip presentation.]

MS. KONDRACKE: Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming this great giant, Geoff Canada.

[Applause, cheering.]

MR. CANADA: Boy, that was fun.

[Laughter.]

MS. KONDRACKE: I forgot to tell you, you also get \$10,000.

MR. CANADA: Oh. Well, there we go, a little thing like that. All right.

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: First of all, thank you, Marguerite. That was really terrific, and I want to thank Independent Sector for playing the critical role it does in this nation.

You know, America is special because of our independent sector. There is hardly another place on the face of the earth that has harnessed both the financial and intellectual firepower that we harness here in America, and it is what has kept this country a great country and what will continue to keep America a great country, but we have to do our job.

And I am particularly honored to get this award because this issue of leadership is really, I think, the key to this nation's future.

But for those of you and I understand we have a bunch of young leaders here I want to let you know that part of what I have tried to do in my journey is always keep clear around the important

things in life, and, you know, in America, you have to really balance what's important because you have what you think is important, and then you have what America thinks is important, and sometimes those are not the same thing.

I'll give you a good example. They mentioned 60 Minutes, and we are getting sort of a refresh from 60 Minutes. They are in the process right now of doing a new piece on us. It's always an interesting thing doing 60 Minutes.

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: You know, because I'm older than most of you here, but I grew up watching 60 Minutes for only one reason, because in the '70s, right, you knew the scoundrels, those sort of people who were polluting the earth and destroying, you know, homes, that they thought that they could fool Mike Wallace and come on 60 Minutes and lie, right?

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: And the show had the same format every single week, and I used to sit there and say, "Why do these idiots go on 60 Minutes?" because they would be lying, right? They would be there. They'd be lying, denying everything, right? And then Mike would ship out the picture of them dumping sludge into the river, right? And I'd sit there and say, "Why do those idiots go on? It's the same format!" And then they called me.

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: So, you know, Ed Bradley is just an incredible journalist and reporter. Right before he passed away, he did the first show we did on 60 Minutes. Ed is a friend, and I just said, "Ed, look, let's not fool around and wait. Don't make me go through 10 or 12 minutes. Just ask me the tough thing right off the bat. What is it?" Right? He said, "Geoff, it's all good."

But, in any case, here Anderson Cooper is doing this new piece, and we were talking to Anderson Cooper about this issue, leadership, and we believe at the Harlem Children's Zone you have to lead from the front, right?

So that, in the end, when something bad is going on, you know, most folk will think my job is to sit and get on the telephone and call somebody and say, "Look, it's going bad over there. Go fix it," but we believe leadership has to go out and demonstrate.

And so we had gotten some calls about some issues of gunfire in one of our housing developments, and I was talking to Anderson. I had to go out, and we call it waving the flag. You go out, and you let the community know that they are not taking Harlem from us, right? The folks, the bad guys, are not going to make my community unlivable for children.

And my staff are working in these places every day, and when things get bad, when bullets start to fly, people need to know that me and George and some of the others are going to go out and be there with them.

So Anderson wants to come. He said, "Oh, Geoff, I'll come out. We're going to film." So I'm thinking, oh, God, please don't let them kill Anderson here in Harlem.

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: It's part of that whole leadership thing, right? It won't be a flattering story on 60 Minutes if they kill Anderson, right?

But just so you understand, that you got to remember this is America. So I'm there, and right at the end of the interview, a woman comes over. She said, "Oh, Mr. Canada, I want to thank you for all you've done for our children and my son in particular. Thank you." I said, "Thank you very much, ma'am," and then she says, "Anderson, I love you."

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: And I thought, well, that's America, right? Thank you for saving my son. Anderson, but I love you, right?

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: Let me say the reason I think my career has been the way it has been.

I believe that for those of us who do this work because it's our mission and not our job, that this is the place to be at. There are people I knew when I was in school who really wanted to make a lot of money, and that's what they wanted to do.

Back in the '70s, if you wanted to make a lot of money, you wanted to go into medicine. Doctors made a lot of money. A lot of people wanted to go into medicine and make money.

There are a number of us who wanted to change America. It's a big thing. We really wanted to change America because we felt this country was great for some people, and for some people, the country wasn't great, and it could be a great country if we could just level that playing field.

So my leadership style has always been driven by intellect and my past, and it's the emotional piece of this that I think people sometimes don't understand.

I was a funny kind of kid because I had a very strong sense of place, and even as a young child, there was something operating in me that was always focused on my surroundings.

I grew up in the South Bronx, and I grew up when that borough was burning down. People don't know the South Bronx in the '70s, but we just grew up with fire engines and rubble. We used to play in the rubble in the streets, just blocks of just abandoned buildings.

And I knew something was wrong. I mean, deeply, fundamentally, profoundly wrong, and everybody was playing and acting like everything was fine. I was only like eight, and I was playing, but I was thinking something is wrong here, and I don't know quite what it is, and no one else seems to be aware that this thing is really serious, but I could feel it. I could just feel something coming to get us.

I didn't know, but it took me many years before I knew what was coming to get us. But I knew that my friends who were playing football and basketball, laughing and joking I knew we were doomed. I knew we weren't getting out, and you couldn't say anything to anybody because people didn't know what you were talking about. And I couldn't define it. I couldn't explain it. I couldn't say to anybody, oh, this is what's going to happen to us. I just could look around and see this is not going to work.

So there was a series of accidents that got me through that experience, right? My grandparents moved, I got to move out of the Bronx. I ended up not going to the school where other people went and by 15, 16, 17, it started taking out all of my friends - drugs, crime, the lousy schools, the lack of opportunity.

I said, well, if I got out of there, I really believed there was a reason. I said, well, there is a reason I'm out, and I have got to find out how this story ends because there's a story here, and it was leading me somewhere, and I didn't know where it was leading me.

And I have learned in life sometimes to go with the current. Sometimes you have to fight the current; sometimes you go with the current. So I said, well, look, there's a story here, I got to figure out where this story is going to end up.

And the next chapter was at Bowdoin. So I went to undergraduate school, small liberal arts college in Maine. The issue was, and that's where I graduated, but the issue was I was never supposed to get in Bowdoin, right? It was just one of these things, it was never supposed to happen, and so, when I look at my life and I think how I actually ended up here, it is because there is this story, right, that's sort of been playing out, and I'm looking because I know the story has an ending. I don't know what the ending is yet, but I know the story has an ending because it's been sort of going in some way that is not clearly directed by myself.

So this is how I got to Bowdoin. At 18, I'm a high school senior. I won a full scholarship from the Masons to go to any State university in New York I wanted to, and I wanted to go to Stony Brook University because it was the best party school on Long Island.

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: And at 18, I had my priorities straight, right? Decent academics, but great party.

Well, so it turns out so I apply, and I get accepted. I get a full scholarship, full room, board, everything. I'm a poor kid. I have no money. They've taken care of everything. Great.

So it's now 1970. It's June. I'm thinking okay, great. July, I haven't heard anything from Stony Brook. It's summertime, and I call Stony Brook, and I say, "Look, guys, how come I haven't heard anything?" They said, "Geoff who?" And they said, "We have no record of Geoff being here." I said, "Gees, well, look. No, no, no. I'm there." He said, "No, I'm sorry, Mr. Canada. You're not coming here to school."

So, 1970, if you were poor, African American, not in college, you were going to war - right? - Vietnam. We all knew it. I thought my life wasn't going there, and I said, well, but now I'm in a bind because I don't have a college to go to. And I remembered there was this funny-sounding college

that they had asked me to apply to, which I didn't want to apply, and this person just bullied me into filling out the forms and doing it. And then, when I got the response, I just threw it in the drawer.

And so now this is July, and I'm looking through all of these papers, and I find this unopened envelope from what I thought was "Boe-doyne," because that is how the name is spelled -- and I opened up the letter, and it says, "Mr. Geoff Canada, we'd like to welcome you to the Class of 1974. Please make sure you respond by, you know, May 1st." I'm thinking, oh, boy, this is going to be tricky.

So I called Bowdoin. It's July. I get the Admissions Office. I said, "Look, this is Geoff Canada, and I am calling because I haven't heard from you all, and I'm planning on coming to school, and" --

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: The woman says, "Hold on one second." She said, "Oh, Mr. Canada, I'm sorry. We never received a response from you saying you were coming to the school." I said, "No, but I sent a response." She said, "No, we're very careful about" -- I said, "No, I sent a response. I'm telling you." She said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Canada." I said, "You're just doing that because I'm black."

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: I admit I did play the race card. I admit it. I admit it. I was desperate, right? So, but this is what I didn't know. See? This is how these strange currents that have been pulling me here, right? This is what I didn't know.

George Khaldun and Rasuli Lewis, who are here and are my partners in this work, were at Bowdoin a year ahead of me, and the year before I got there, they shut the school down because they were not allowing poor, inner-city black kids to come to Bowdoin, and it was happening all over America. There was a real struggle to open up these institutions, and no one wanted to go to Maine. This is Brunswick, Maine.

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: And so, when I tell the woman, "You're just doing this to me because I'm black," I can feel as she said, "Would you hold on?" And I know --

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: -- she yelled to the head of Admissions, "We got one."

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: It's a true story.

So the woman gets back on the phone. She said, "Mr. Canada, we're going to make an exception. We're going to let you come," and that's how I got into Bowdoin.

And so then I get to Bowdoin, and I meet these people there who actually understand what I was seeing when I was a kid. When I began to tell them, no, no, when I was growing up, I knew that this thing was going to get us and it just destroyed, they said, "No, no, no. We know about that," and I was like, "What do you mean?" They knew about it.

And then I said, "Oh," and somebody said, "We're here to do something about that," and I said, "Here in Maine?"

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: Right? I mean, it's only the whitest State in the country, right?

Well, yes. Yes, very smart people ended up in Brunswick, Maine, at the same time with a mission, on a mission to change America, and those powerful currents, some which I control, some which I had no control over, kept pulling me.

So I would love to say that was the end of it, but it wasn't. We come and I starting this work, and it's never -- it's never left me that the reason I do this job is because there are still places in America where kids are growing up, where they don't have a chance.

Now, you can be philosophical or maybe you want to be charitable, but I am telling you there are places in America right now where children literally have not a chance.

Now, I was faced with this thing, right? I'm 57. I was faced with this thing 50 years ago. How could we still -- how could we still have places where just because you're born in a certain place, it is over, you don't get out?

So, yeah, we thought, those of us who had that feeling, that if you forget -- and you get honors, you get awards, you get accolades. If you forget why you're even doing this work and think it's because maybe you want to get your name in the paper or you get a nice award, I will tell you, you won't end up leading from the front. You will end up --

[Applause.]

MR. CANADA: -- leading from the rear.

So let's get to these other currents. So I'm sitting in my office one day, and my director of policy calls me, and she says, "Geoff, you're never going to believe this." I said, "What?" She said, "Senator Obama's office called, and they want to announce on Thursday that they are going to replicate the Harlem Children's Zone, and it's going to be their strategy -- well, they didn't call them "Harlem Children's Zone." They had no names at that point. "It's going to be their strategy for fighting poverty in America."

I said, "Senator Obama?" Yes. Two and a half years ago. I said, "Well, when are they going to do it?" She said, "Thursday." I said, "Well, no, that's a problem." She said, "What's the problem?" I said, "No, no, because I have a very -- you know, I have a board that's made up of a spectrum of the body politic. My board chair was the Treasurer for Mitt Romney. Another board member was

supporting Giuliani. Another board member is supporting Senator Clinton. President Clinton's office is only two blocks from my main office, and he's my friend. And I know Senator Clinton."

I said, "Well, look, you have to tell the Senator, I'm really flattered. I really am, but you have to tell the Senator that he's got to give me like 72 hours, so I can tell people out there because everybody's going to think that, you know, now I've jumped to the guy in Chicago, and, you know, two blocks from me is" --

She called the Senator. They said, "Will you just tell Geoff, we really appreciate and we're sensitive to the issue, but we're going live tomorrow," and Senator Obama went out and made the announcement.

Now, I thought so he's Senator now, right? I thought I don't know where this is going. This could have two endings, right?

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: He could lose, and then I'm toast, right, because everybody is going to say, "Why did you jump with him?" I said, "Or he could win, and then who knows?"

Well, we know how that story ended up. He won. So I don't know the end of the story. I'm sort of right in the middle of the story, but I will tell you this. At this particular time in our country, we have an opportunity to really move the needle. We have an opportunity to do something that's never happened in this country, to really level the playing field.

There is no one who is going to lead that charge except folk in the Independent Sector. We are the ones who have the freedom to take what I would consider to be radical risks.

Now, here people get concerned because we all need a job. Well, if you're independently wealthy, you don't need a job, but I need to work. So I need to keep my job, but, at the same time, this is no time to be cautious. This is no time to think, well, this doesn't feel like, you know -- I don't know how all this is going to work out, and what happens if, because I am telling you in the same way when I was in that hell hole in the Bronx feeling that something was coming to get us. I am telling you I know this is our moment. This is a time when we can really do something great in this country if we're not afraid to really go out and stretch and take a chance and demand excellence all around.

See, because there are a lot of terrific programs in America. There are a lot of young people who have decided that they are going to sort of up the ante. They are going to create new innovative things. They are going to deal with the tough things we've been dealing with around measurement and scale. I could rattle off 20 or 30. Some of them are right here in this room.

So we have an opportunity that I think comes around once in a lifetime, but, if you all are young, maybe it's just once in my lifetime because I'm not going to be here that much longer. So some of you are going to have a much longer time than me, but this is our moment right now, and I think you have to ask yourself are you prepared to seize this moment?

I'm going to leave you with this thought that I don't really talk about outside of my own shop, something that I believe, and I know we have a lot of young leaders here. So I'm going to do something more public than I usually do, which is to talk about the tyranny of opportunity.

You can spend your whole life planning for the perfect moment to do something, and it never comes, and sometimes you are not ready, and the moment comes and you have to know this is the moment.

Now, I'll give you this example. My first book came out, "Fist Stick Knife Gun." Someone I know who is here came to me and said, "Geoff, I know Oprah is a person who does her book club, and I'd like you to meet them." Being the genius that I am, I said, "Well, I'm writing a second book, and I don't want her to do this book. I want her to do the next book."

[Laughter.]

MR. CANADA: Now, so let's just get this straight. So, if Oprah does your book, you sell a million dollars worth of books overnight, right? You instantly become a millionaire, and what was my brilliant conclusion? This was not the right moment for Oprah. I had a better moment for her.

So, needless to say, when the second book is done and I go and think, "Okay, I'd like to have that meeting," he's gone from the show. So sometimes you get an opportunity, you take the opportunity. It is the tyranny of opportunity.

This is one of those moments. We have, I think, put together the intellectual firepower to get real movement done. We have the financial capital to do big things in America. It's a time to dream big and execute, I think, with a savage intensity, and we could really turn this country around overnight.

People forget that, you know, there used to be no Medicaid. There used to be no Social Security. These things did not exist. This was someone's idea. If you think when someone came up with it, everybody said, "Oh, that's great, let's do that," you're mistaken. There were people who were totally opposed to this who said, "If you do this, you will destroy America." There was a vicious fight, and some people stood up and said, "This will be good for the country." Nothing that we do will we ever get folk to universally say that's the right thing you can do.

But I will tell you in closing that it is my belief that if you can lead with your intellect and with your heart and if you're unafraid to lead from the front, which means you take the hits, you don't put them on somebody else, you don't hide behind someone below you in case things don't go well, that we have a unique opportunity in this country, and there won't be another generation of kids growing up where one of them realizes we're not getting out of this. And there's no one coming to their rescue.

I know that this is our moment. I can feel it. Thank you.

[Applause.]

MS. DINGELL: Isn't that an inspiration? And are we going to be there for this moment? Is he going to be our leader?

[Applause, cheering.]

MS. DINGELL: I have only one problem, Geoff. You're not old. I'm only one year younger than you, and I hope you get a lot more in you because I'm going to be a follower.

I think I speak for all of us when I express our sincere appreciation for what you did express to us tonight. It's something we're going to carry in our hearts. Your work is not only critically important, but it is inspirational. Thank you.

And for the next-gens out there, this is the man you follow.

[Applause.]

MS. DINGELL: We're going to wrap up in a minute before ending with the privilege of hearing again, one more time from the Mosaic Youth Theater Group, but before they perform, I want to thank all of you for being with us tonight and for coming to Detroit and seeing what we're all about and to Diana for her leadership for a truly memorable conference.

[Applause.]

MS. DINGELL: After the dinner, we'll be treated to some music and dancing. I hope you're all going to dance. We know how to dance in Motown, in the Cabot Room right next door, and I hope you'll all join us.

Once again, congratulations to our award winners, and without further delay, let's conclude the evening with the Mosaic Theater again.

[Applause.]

[Presentation by Mosaic Youth Theater Group.]