

MELINDA GATES
UNITED WAY OF KING COUNTY BREAKFAST
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Good morning. I can't think of a better way to start the day than with friends and neighbors, talking about our shared commitment to making life safe, healthy, and happy for every family in King County.

This year, as the United Way of King County celebrates its 85th birthday, your good deeds matter more than ever. You raise money for our neighbors in need. You allocate the funds in thoughtful and strategic ways. You bring business and government leaders together to solve the community's problems. You highlight hundreds of opportunities for service, and you bring impressive strategic focus to your work.

It is so tempting, when the needs are so many, to apply a thin layer of resources over a broad range of problems – and do a lot of charity, but not effect much change. By focusing on ending homelessness and making sure all kids are school ready, you make a serious impact on these core issues, which makes related problems so much easier to address.

Bill and I have special respect for the work you do in these two areas, because we are your partners in both pursuits. I'd like to talk with you today about our common efforts in homelessness and early learning – and also about the historical link between our family's giving and the United Way of King County.

Our approach as a foundation reflects an ideal that has been indispensable to the birth and growth of this country – the belief that every human being has equal worth. Our foundation looks for the most intractable problems, and in our experience, the most intractable problems and the greatest needs all coincide with the greatest inequities.

In the developing world, there's no question that the greatest inequity is in global health. Millions of children are dying every year because they lack the vaccines and simple medical interventions that we take for granted in rich countries. We're working to end that.

Here in America, we believe the most destructive inequity is in education. Of every 100 students in ninth grade in America today, only 70 will graduate from high school. Only 40 will go directly to college. Only 30 will be *prepared* for college. That doesn't meet any American's understanding of equality, and we're working to change it.

Here in the Pacific Northwest, we saw homelessness as a serious problem that had attracted the hard work and attention of many groups. At the same time, we felt there was a role for us in helping to coordinate the work of housing nonprofits and social service agencies so we could fight family homelessness in a comprehensive way. This is how we've come to work alongside United Way and so many other extraordinary partners on this issue.

In the whole range of human needs, there are few things more basic than having a home. You can't be safe if you're on the street. You won't be healthy for long without a roof over your head. It is hard to imagine how people can get an education, make friends, fall in love, live their dreams, or raise their children without having a place to call home.

Yet on any given night there are more than 8,000 homeless people in King County, and close to half of the homeless population are families with children. This is an emergency, especially for the children. If they can't find a home, it will be hard for them to do well in school, develop their talents, and live a productive life.

We have to understand that homelessness is just *one* of many problems that homeless people face, and it aggravates all the other problems that surround them before and after they lose their homes.

That's why we see homelessness as a strategic intervention point.

I got a lesson about this a few years back.

Bill and I wanted to begin teaching our children, at an early age, about hands-on philanthropy and the duty they have to help others. So one day a few years ago, I took two of our kids to a community event where we assembled boxes of supplies and toiletries to give to homeless people. We put a bar of soap, a little tube of toothpaste, a toothbrush, a comb into each box – so the people who would come to a shelter at night would get the supplies they needed to clean up.

We spent a few hours with other families and kids, building lots and lots of these kits. And as we were leaving the facility – I wanted to see what had sunk in with my children. So I asked: “What did you think of what we just did? Wasn't that great? We got to put supplies in all those boxes for homeless people.” And my 4-year-old turned to me and said: “But Mom! Don't they need a home?”

You don't fight homelessness by giving people toiletries, or food stamps, or medical care, or even by giving them a job or an education. You fight homelessness first and foremost by helping people find a home. Then you build on it, by adding all these other things as well.

That was our approach when the Gates Foundation worked with housing authorities, state and local governments, and many of you in this room to launch the Sound Families Initiative in 2000. Our goal was to create 1,500 transitional housing units for homeless families in Pierce, Snohomish, and King Counties.

But unlike most low-income housing, the Sound Families homes are what we call “service-enriched.” Every family living in a Sound Families home is tied in to an on-site network of social services. If a mother needs help finding a job... getting her GED... scheduling a doctor's appointment for her kids or domestic-abuse counseling for herself...

she can find the help she needs right where she lives.

About a year ago, I went to visit a mother who had just moved with her children into one of the transitional housing units that we were helping to fund. Her name was Kathy. A few months before, Kathy was living with her husband and children. But when her husband turned abusive and her children were in danger, she took the kids and left – with no income, no job, and nowhere to go.

She found her way to a shelter in Snohomish County, and shortly after that, to the transitional housing apartment where she and I met. She welcomed me warmly into her home. She showed me around – the kitchen, the bedrooms, the TV room. She showed me pictures of the kids. Then she invited me to sit down in her living room, and she described what she had been through.

She talked about the shame she felt as a mother to have no home for her kids. Then, as she was telling me how people from a local church helped her move her boxes and pictures into this new home of hers, she just broke down.

It was overwhelming for her to ponder where she had been, and where she was now. She was in a nice, safe home with her children.

To me, it was striking just how normal it was. A lot of people hear “transitional housing” and think – “well, this must be some place that sits off by itself.” But the beauty of this apartment and others like it -- is that it’s a set of apartment buildings that young professionals might live in.

There wasn’t any sense of separateness. There was no sense of stigma. That family was an integral part of a nice neighborhood. They were using services that were right there in that community, taking the bus, walking to school. It gave her the sense of normality that mothers crave for their children.

At the same time, she was getting help with all her needs *on site*. People were helping her with education, her job search, medical care – the whole range of issues that could suddenly put Kathy and her children back out on the street.

Kathy is a big success story.

But if we’re going to succeed over the long run with Kathy’s family and other families like hers, we’ve got to make sure we’re helping the children. If children who grow up poor are going to have any chance of raising children who are *not* poor, that chance is going to come from getting a good education – and that starts with early learning.

We at the Gates Foundation first came to our work in early learning through our efforts with at-risk youth – and trying to understand what can help them *overcome* that risk. The more we learned, the clearer it became that a good experience in school is indispensable.

Right now, when underprivileged children show up for the first day of school, they're already behind – and when kids start behind, they stay behind. If we want all kids to show up for kindergarten ready to learn, we have to understand this gap – and help close it.

Over the years, I have visited several low-quality child-care centers in King County, and I have been horrified by what I've seen. The teachers weren't properly trained. It wasn't their fault, but they didn't know how to engage the kids — or their parents. Many children were left sitting in cribs for too long, unattended and understimulated. It wasn't what any of us would want for our children, and I just thought how heartbreaking it must be for moms to leave their kids there day after day.

On the other hand, when I went to see a high quality Head Start facility, I thought: "I'd put my kids here in a heartbeat." The kids were completely engaged and learning, with healthy meals, toys, games, instruction, and attention. Some were outside, playing in the sandbox, running around the yard, under the guidance of trained staff. Others were in a classroom, getting individual attention, working with a great teacher on stories or games. All the kids were learning, having fun, developing socially, emotionally, and physically – getting what they needed so they could do well in school and beyond.

The difference between that center and the other made the point so plainly to me – quality shouldn't be based on what you can afford. Everybody – without regard to race, class, income, or street address – ought to have equal access to great early learning.

At-risk kids who get into high-quality early learning programs have shown life-long benefits. They are much more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, earn a higher income, and delay parenting. Moreover, every dollar invested in these programs generates four to eight dollars down the line — both in increased earnings by the students and decreased costs to the government.

Unfortunately, most of the families who need these programs don't get them. In one survey, kindergarten teachers in Washington reported that half the children in the state start kindergarten without the skills they need to succeed: skills like recognizing letters and numbers, holding a pencil or scissors, and playing well with others.

We can do better here in Washington.

In May of last year, we at the Gates Foundation began our early learning strategy for the state. Working with a number of partners, we are creating two demonstration communities — one in eastern Washington and one in western Washington. Both communities will include a comprehensive early learning center that will offer high-quality child care and pre-school, a strong curriculum, and lots of individual attention.

The centers will also serve as a hub for outreach to other child-care facilities and to families caring for young children so that every child and parent in the community can benefit. Our hope is that these communities will be able to demonstrate approaches that

work, and that over time, quality early learning will be made available to every child in the state of Washington.

In addition, we're going to find promising models of early learning around the state and support and publicize their work – and we're going to encourage parents to seek out early learning for their children and improve Washington state's ability to deliver it.

Now, we know that no lasting change ever comes about from one group, one foundation, one agency. That's why a core element of our strategy is to do all of our work in partnership with other public and private funders – and we're proud to be working with a fantastic coalition on early learning.

It's called "Thrive by Five: The Washington Early Learning Fund" – and it includes the United Way of King County, Boeing Corporation, Russell Investment Group, the Allen Foundation, the Medina Foundation, the Gates Foundation, and the state government, which has just created a new department of early learning. The partnership will be co-chaired by the governor and my father-in-law, Bill Gates Sr.

The challenge for all of us is to find ways to bring high-quality early learning to all communities, recognizing that this means delivering help to kids in many different environments. This will be difficult, but there is no other way to reach the goal. If we're going to build an educational ladder that our children can climb all the way to college, we've got to make sure every child can reach up and grab that first rung.

I would like to close my remarks today with some reflections about the Gates family and the United Way of King County.

As you all know, my mother-in-law, Mary Gates, believed deeply in charity, and in the United Way especially. She worked for years for the United Way in different capacities, and so has Bill Senior. When Mary was on the allocation committee, I understand the discussion at the family dinner table often focused on the various organizations that were asking the United Way for funding. My husband, Bill, was just in his teens at the time. For a while, he would listen and take it all in. But it doesn't take Bill long to start asking questions. And he soon began to challenge his mom. I understand the conversations went something like this:

"Mom, let's look at this strategically – what needs aren't being met? What other problems contribute to *this* problem? Who's trying to meet them? What results are they getting? How do you measure that?"

This is how Bill got his first taste of philanthropy.

Some years later, after Bill and Paul Allen moved Microsoft to Seattle, Mary began pushing Bill to start a United Way campaign at Microsoft. For a while, Bill resisted. He'd say: "Mom, we're trying to build a business. The best way I can serve the community is by making this business succeed."

Mary never disputed that point. She just believed Bill could do both. And she was persistent. Mary was not the first in her family to work for the United Way. Her father had been a secretary of the local United Way, and her mother worked as a door-to-door fundraiser for the United Way, back when they had such a thing.

So Mary's devotion to the United Way did not originate with her; it was an inherited trait – one she was determined to pass on to her son. She kept after Bill. Then one day Mary heard from the United Way office that a person from Microsoft just called in, asking about how to set up a United Way campaign. Bill never actually told his mom he was going to do it; he just did it.

Shortly thereafter, Mary persuaded Bill to join the national board. As you probably know, Bill believes in competition and the good it can do for society. So he and others in this room quickly turned charitable giving into a contest between King County and the rest of the country. I think the record shows that we've done pretty well.

The United Way was a very positive experience for Bill. So when Microsoft became very successful, he already had the idea planted deep in his heart that this wealth had to be given back to society to do the greatest good for the largest number.

So I want to say to members of the board, the staff, and the supporters of the United Way of King County: when you sit and take stock of the impact your work has had in the world, you can add to the list the birth of one family foundation here in Seattle.

Today, as Bill and I pursue our work around the world – seeing the tragic inequities in global health, the desperate poverty, the people on the street, the children left behind, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed.

But Bill and I are optimistic. We say: “let's look at this strategically – what needs aren't being met? What other problems contribute to this problem? Who's trying to meet them? What results are they getting? How do you measure that?”-- the same questions Bill started asking more than thirty years ago, sitting at the family dinner table, talking to his mom and dad about the United Way.

Bill and I want to offer you our heartfelt thanks for being such great partners and teachers. Keep on doing all the good deeds you're doing. Together, we have a real chance to change the world. Thank you.