

Remarks from Senator Karen E. Spilka, July 26, 2018

Thank you...

I'd like to begin today with a story. The story of a young man – a teenager – who fled Russia in 1906. The story of a young man who, one day, was protesting the oppressive policies of the Czar with his best friend; and the next day, discovered the body of that friend hanging in the square of his small village.

The young man's friend had been killed for his religious and political beliefs, and that young man's father knew his son would be next.

And so, that day, the father said goodbye to his son, and his son set out for America to save his own life.

That young man, who left everything he knew and everyone he loved, was my grandfather, Joseph Goldstein. His story is my family's story.

By the time I became aware of the details of my grandfather's harrowing journey, our family was like any other successful immigrant family.

America had welcomed him with open arms, and many of his family members joined him over time.

My father served in World War II, and my mother left her job as a social worker to care for her four children, one of whom -- my dear sister Susie -- was born with Down Syndrome.

My parents worked hard, my siblings and I received public school educations, and three of us went on to college.

Inspired by my mother to help others, I followed in her footsteps as a social worker after graduating from the state-supported School of Human Ecology at Cornell University.

Like any typical American family, things weren't always easy, and life was sometimes hard, but because America had a generous immigration policy, my family's story didn't end in tragedy in a small Russian village.

And my story – the story of a social worker who became an improbable legislator, let alone Senate President – was able to be written.

Every day, the stories of people's lives shape the choices that we make, and the choices we make -- as legislators, as advocates and as citizens -- shape the stories of individuals and families across the Commonwealth.

I received a poignant reminder of this recently, when a young person in my district named Ella sent me a letter about a driver's license.

What should have been a day of celebration and rite of passage for this young person turned into a source of stress and frustration.

The letter read, "I am going to start driving lessons this fall and I would be ecstatic to have a more neutral option than 'Male' or 'Female' on my license."

In an instant, my understanding of a driver's license went from that of a mundane government document to that of an opportunity to make the state a more inclusive place.

The last two sentences of their letter really struck me. They said, "This is about validating and letting people be who they are. I need you to step up as an elected official and be an advocate for myself and others like me."

I was so impressed that I called Ella that day, and said let's work together on a change.

When we help write the stories of our residents, I believe we must always aspire to justice and do our part to uphold human dignity.

So I'm confident that, with the support of the leaders in this room, we will soon have a law in Massachusetts that will create a Gender X option for all licenses and state IDs.

And with it, we will be one step closer to writing a story that lets people be who they are.

It can be easy to think of what we do in government as separate from our day-to-day lives, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Here in the Massachusetts State House, the choices we make, big and small, help to shape the stories that will be told for years to come.

In my own story, I can point to one policy decision that had far-reaching consequences in my life: the creation of the formula which determines the funding for our state's public schools.

As a young MetroWest mom back in the 1990s, I was happily running my own business as a mediator and arbitrator, after graduating from Northeastern Law School and going into labor and employment law.

My husband, Joel, also ran his own small business, and we were enjoying life in Ashland with our two young boys.

Frustration with our local school funding, however, led me to make choices which, ultimately, brought me here today.

I studied the education funding formula, and, just like Ella, I contacted my legislators and asked for a change.

As a school committee member, I invited like-minded parents, educators, advocates and others from all over Massachusetts to collaborate on funding reform.

The possibility of making real change – in the lives of my sons and the lives of other children across the state – inspired me, and so when the State Rep seat opened up in my district, I knew that day that I would run.

My belief in fairness in education funding propelled me to run for office, and it is a belief that I will never waver from, because I know that the story of each child will be written here based on the choices we make.

Sometimes, it isn't until years later that you realize how your story shapes your life.

My father, like so many other World War II veterans, suffered from undiagnosed mental illness in the years after returning home.

As a teenager, I could see how much he was struggling, and I often wondered what his life – and mine – would have been like if he had received the services he needed.

His story taught me: how vital the need is for comprehensive veteran's services; how important it is to instill resiliency in children who grow up in difficult situations; and how great the need is to eliminate the stigma around mental illness – and achieve mental health parity here in Massachusetts once and for all.

My story is also intertwined with that of my sister, Susie, who was born with Down Syndrome.

I spent 26 years as her legal guardian, and through our close relationship she helped both ground me – and inspire me.

She taught me how much our lives and communities are enriched when we include people of all abilities.

"I got my paycheck!" was her rallying cry each week, which taught me that giving people the opportunity to participate in our economy – as well as the tools to succeed – benefits us all.

When more people fulfill their economic potential, they will be more independent, they will be less likely to be involved in the child welfare or criminal justice systems, and

they will be less likely to end up living alone, isolated and vulnerable to health problems, mental illness or substance abuse.

This is how we will unlock our fullest potential as a Commonwealth – by building community through creating healthy families and thriving neighborhoods, and this is how we positively shape the stories of our families, our friends, our neighbors – and, ourselves.

But let's be honest: there are those out there who love nothing more than to criticize the work of government.

In my experience, however, my fellow Senators – as well as our Representatives, those in the Administration, and our local officials -- are here because you share my belief that you can help shape our collective story for the greater good.

And the fact remains, that in the system of government that our forefathers set out for us, we are responsible for each other.

We are responsible for writing our own story, and so we must do the hard work of decision-making and policymaking – of listening and deciding when to compromise and when to stand firm.

Throughout my career, I have never apologized for my strong belief that we are here to do policy and do it well.

When policy affects everything from our institutions to our communities, our businesses to individual lives, it is worth putting in the hard work.

That is the job we have been sent here to do, and we must always remember that it is an honor and a privilege to do the work entrusted to us by the people, just like it is an honor, and a privilege, to have the opportunity to write a small part of the story of Massachusetts.

And what a story we have to tell.

From the Revolution to public education, from abolition, to civil rights, and from healthcare reform to equal marriage, we have always led our nation by being bold in our vision and in our actions.

Here in Massachusetts, we prove that crafting thoughtful policy and making careful investments in our people works.

Here in Massachusetts, wages are higher, our workforce is more educated, and our economy is one of the strongest in the nation.

Here in Massachusetts, we lead the way in clean energy, education and veterans benefits, and our imprisonment rate is among the lowest.

Here in Massachusetts, we tell the story every day that caring for each other works.

This is not to say that we don't have areas we must improve upon but by working together, by building on the strengths we bring from each region, and by tackling our challenges head on, we will continue to be a leading light in our nation; and by our willingness to bring all voices to the table, we can write a story of a Commonwealth that is vibrant, diverse, dynamic and strong

I am so thankful that my story has led me here, to the Massachusetts Senate -- an institution I can honestly say I love with all my heart.

As I stand before you, I am struck by the awesome – and awe-inspiring -- responsibility of leading this body.

Our chamber has experienced difficult times of late, but I have always believed that out of difficulty comes opportunity – a chance to write a different story.

As we turn the page and look to the future, I pledge to uphold and maintain the integrity of the Senate – for the public and for each and every Senator, staff member, advocate and intern that passes through our doors, and I promise that when the next chapter in the story of the Massachusetts State Senate is written, it will say that we created a welcoming, inclusive, collaborative and safer place, where differences of opinion are not only tolerated, but celebrated, and no one fears discrimination based on their race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, country of origin, ability or background.

I look forward to working with my colleagues in the Senate – and with Speaker DeLeo and members of the House, and Governor Baker and those in the Administration – to usher in a new era here at the State House.

Serving in the Senate has been – and will continue to be – one of the greatest chapters in MY life story.

I am grateful for this opportunity each and every day.

And so I would like to sincerely thank all of you for your trust in me, and for sharing my belief that the act of crafting policy, when done in good faith, really can make a positive difference in our collective story.

As I have done many times in this chamber, I will look to you, my fellow Senators, for ideas on how we continue to build and implement our shared vision.

I am so thrilled that we will get to write the next chapter of this wonderful institution together.

And so, I stand before you, incredibly humbled, honored, and ready to be your next President of the Massachusetts Senate.