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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT THE WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT NETWORK LUNCHEON

Kansas City, Missouri

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you so much, Beth Smith, and thank all of you for inviting me to be part of this celebration on behalf of the Women's Employment Network. I am very pleased that I was able to hear the testimonies of Jody Wood and Lynette Williams, and I know that they speak for the many, many women who have taken advantage of the opportunities offered here.

And I also want to thank all of you who represent the investments in and commitment to the Women's Employment Network, but more than that, to the kind of hope and opportunity that the Mayor spoke of a few minutes ago. The individual citizens and organizations and businesses who support this Network has been able to enjoy have helped thousands of women in this community begin, renew their lives.

I think the dedicated staff of WEN, who teach women every day to believe in themselves, to develop the resources that they need to care for themselves, their families and to earn an income, should be especially thanked. Women like Lynette Williams, who share their experiences with so many others. Each of the graduates who happen to be here today offer proof to all of us that if we extend a helping hand, if we believe in each other, if we respect one another, if we empathize with the troubles that fall unevenly amongst us, if we admit honestly to ourselves that there but for the grace of God go I or someone I love -- then each of these graduates stands not only on her own but on behalf of every one of us here today.

As I listened to the two stories that we heard, I thought of the many, many women with whom I have met and the stories that I have heard all over our country -- women who find themselves in circumstances they did not predict nor certainly plan for; women who too often are stereotyped, who are given very little credit for what they can do and the contributions they have made, who, because of the way they are viewed too often by the world outside, begin to believe those stereotypes about themselves and conclude that they have no value as a human being.

Yet each of the graduates here today and all who have come before represent how wrong those stereotypes can be. Because what WEN has proven is that if we provide the tools of opportunity to each other we can see lives transformed. Women can lift themselves and their families out of poverty; they can become economically self-sufficient; they can contribute to the local economies and the communities. All they need is a little help and a little confidence that they can do it.

And how many times have each of us here needed a little help and a little confidence? Maybe it was in a different situation that we confronted our own doubts, but there isn't a man or a woman in this room who has not had them. But for some people they pile up and before you know it, you're a victim of abuse or a husband with a cocaine habit or an unexpected death or a lay-off or some other unforeseen circumstance.

So part of what WEN does which is so important is to stop the process of making false assumptions about people and recognize that within each person there's a reservoir of potential that can be tapped. The services that are provided here are not complicated; they are very down to earth and basic. They do help women understand what they have to do inside themselves to feel that confidence and self-esteem that is essential for their being able to maintain a job, to go forward in the world. Skills training, preparation for interviews, job placement counseling -- those are all part of the services that are provided.

And then there are some others that are necessary -- child care and transportation assistance. They too must be part of the package if we want to end the ethos of dependency or welfare in order to give people the tools they need to fend for themselves.

WEN has also worked closely with both the public and the private sectors. They understand that passing the welfare reform bill was one step. Important as it was, actually implementing welfare reform is the big challenge. For every person who has ever criticized the existing welfare system -- and I am among them -- now we have nothing left to criticize. The federal entitlement for welfare is gone and we only now can look to ourselves.

Here in Kansas City and around the country, how will we change our attitudes? How will we break through those stereotypes and assumptions about people like Lynette or Jody or the countless others who WEN has helped? How will we be able to assist WEN with its work and do our own to make sure that not only are jobs available but the other assistance that needs to go along with the offer of a job is as well.

I believe that this challenge is one that can be met in Kansas City and around the country. But I don't delude myself about the difficulty that we face. Many factors conspire to keep women on welfare and out of work. And many of the ingredients necessary to assist women off of public assistance are ones that have to be looked at carefully and then packaged on a much bigger scale than even WEN has been able to do.

Yet if we take this challenge seriously, we have a chance, as we end this century, to do something that has never been done anywhere in the world. Many other countries don't provide assistance to those who are poor, out of work, down on their luck. Many others have provided a vast network of assistance which has had unfortunate and unintended consequences of making people generationally trapped in dependency.

What we are attempting to do here in our country is to say, we had good intentions when the welfare system was established and there are many people who passed through that system without being trapped in it. But unfortunately, there were a number of people who became dependent, and their children and generations to follow did as well.

So, we want to send a clear signal that we cannot permit any individual to sacrifice that individual's independence any longer. But if that's all we do, then we -- not the welfare recipients -- but we will have failed. Because now that we have ended the federal welfare system, the responsibility for determining how we treat each other, how we provide opportunities for those who may be down on their luck, between marriages, or after jobs, or who are trapped in dependency, that is going to be answered literally business by business, church by church, city by city throughout this country.

The President has said over and over again that if we do not create jobs, if we do not follow WEN's example and provide the assistance that will be needed to millions -- not hundreds, but millions -- of Americans, we cannot expect this grand experiment in ending welfare to be successful.

So how do we respond? Well, we respond, as you are today, by supporting WEN. But we will have to do more. We will have to have more businesses willing to work with welfare recipients and with organizations like WEN to help prepare people to enter the world of work and to keep a job. We will have to reach out on a one-to-one basis, as WEN has done, to give people those levels of confidence and self-esteem that are essential to repair those damaged and often broken dreams that people will bring with them to our doorsteps.

WEN has encouraged individual businesses in the community to do everything from donating business attire for graduates to volunteering in various not-for-profit organizations around the city. But now we're going to have to call on businesses and religious institutions and not-for-profits to figure out a way how to give a job, a mentoring relationship, a helping hand to many more.

If businesses will be willing to hire people who have been on welfare, they will need help from organizations like WEN. It is not easy taking someone who may never have been employed or employed only sporadically and turning that person into an independent, self-sufficient worker. It will be easy to become discouraged. It will be easy to fall back on old stereotypes and I-told-you-so's.

But then, what are we left with? People who have no assistance at all, left in a work force that is rapidly changing with increasing demands from the Information Age. What will become of them and their children? And unfortunately, we know too well, as the Mayor solemnly reminded us, that violence and all the terrible consequences of hopelessness not only stalk those who are trapped but all the rest of us as well.

When the President was here last fall, he met with several graduates of WEN whom he had also visited with on a trip a few years before. And I remember him saying afterward how encouraging it was to see women who were willing to work hard and take responsibility and who were succeeding. But he was equally impressed by the employers who had hired them. One ran a family-owned dry cleaning business; another was the president of a records management storage firm; another the CEO of a major organization. Very different kinds of businesses. But the leadership of each was committed to what they felt was an obligation to give people in their community a chance to prove themselves in the workplace. Their businesses were better for it, and so was Kansas City.

This will be a community effort if it is successful. It takes a very significant organization like WEN to provide a safe haven for women who might otherwise have nowhere else to turn, but it will take much more than WEN can do alone.

How is a former welfare mother without a car expected to hold a job without adequate public transportation? How is a mother with small children expected to work without transportation to get a child to child care or without child care that is acceptable and affordable? How is she to stay on the job if she doesn't feel, after the first day there, that she can measure up and there is no one there to say, look, I know how it feels, let me help you? How is she supposed to work, most fundamentally of all, if there are not any jobs available?

This is a challenge that each of us as an American now faces. And these are the areas that will be particularly difficult but can be addressed if the entire community pulls together, if elected officials and business and labor leaders and those in our religious community and our not-for-profit sector and voluntary organizations all take as our priority making welfare reform work, not just walking away from a piece of legislation and thinking the job has been done but being honest in recognizing it has just begun.

There are thousands, if not millions, of people across our country right now waiting to see what will happen. I have met them. Many of you have as well. They have all kinds of potential. They are willing to be helped. And today we celebrate what happens when that help is delivered effectively and sensitively -- the kind of public-private partnership that makes success stories like the ones we have heard happen.

I thank all of you who have had any role in the creation, the sustaining and supporting of WEN for demonstrating clearly what it will take and how it can work. I look forward to hearing more in the months and years to come of how Kansas City is meeting this challenge.

When I was last here, I learned about the work that is being done to address the problems of children in Kansas City, and today I come to salute those of you who are concerned about what happens when women seek employment in your community.

I am very optimistic. I guess I have that endless hope that the Mayor talked about, that when America has ever been faced with a challenge we have risen to meet it. And I think this is one of the greatest challenges that we have confronted as a country. Will we do more than pay lip service to the concept of community? Will we translate into action what so many of us say in church on Sunday morning about love and charity? And will we follow the Golden Rule and reach out to those who are in need of our help?

The answer to that question, I believe more than any other, will determine the quality of life in our country in the next century. And I'm betting that we will give it the best answer we can, in places like Kansas City and others around America, because we want our children and every man and woman in America to know that this country and its dreams really are still alive.

Thank you for what you're doing and the example you are setting. (Applause.)

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