

0-12-00  
Oliver Awards

**Orphan Foundation of America "OLIVER" Awards  
Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton**

**J.W. Marriott Hotel  
Washington, D.C.  
June 12, 2000**

(Thank you all. Thank you to Eileen McCaffrey, the OLIVER recipients and the entire) BEGIN TAPE ... and the Orphan Foundation of America for the work you do day in and day out, year in and year out, and for this tremendous honor that you are bestowing on Congressman Delay and myself. I also want to thank Freddie Mac and everyone who is here tonight to ensure that the end of foster care doesn't mean the end of caring for our young people.

I was thinking in preparation for coming here tonight, what the journey was that brought me to this stage, and I suppose it would have to start back in my own childhood when I found out that my mother did not have a very happy childhood. She had very young parents who were totally unprepared to care for her, and their young and unstable marriage broke up at a very early age, and so when she was around six or seven, really for most years before that, she was pretty much on her own. No one knew quite what to do with her and her very young little sister, and so they struck upon the idea of sending them to California—she was then living in Chicago—to live with her paternal grandparents. So my mother was put on a train, with her little sister, when she was seven or eight, her sister was about four or five, and set along to California. And somehow that image, as a little girl growing up in a very secure home, just never left my mind. The idea of putting such small children on a train for a long, long journey on their own was just something I could not imagine. And then when they arrived in California, it was not to a very enthusiastic and warm family welcome. Her grandparents were not pleased at all about becoming responsible for these two little girls. And so a few years later my mother basically found herself on her own again. Well, in those days, there was not the formal foster care system that we know today, so my mother went looking for a job at the age of thirteen, and was fortunate enough to find a family, particularly the woman of the family, who would take her in, and in return for my mother taking care of the children, she'd be given room and board, and, what to her was the greatest gift of all, the chance to finish school. So every morning she would get up very early, take care of the young children in her care, get them off to school, run off to high school, and then come back and take care of the children. Then she was able, by doing that, to finish high school. So, when I was a little girl, one of the things we did in my home was to give work, my mother did, to young girls who were in foster care—who found themselves living in group homes and who had never had the experience of being in a family, and it was one of the ways my mother felt she could really pay back the many kindnesses and the example of what a family looked like, that she could pass on to these young women.

So when I went to law school, I became very interested in working on behalf of children, particularly the children among us who are often most vulnerable and really left out. And I would work at the Legal Aid Society in New Haven, and work on behalf of the

needs of foster children, and it opened my eyes to so many of the issues that the Orphan Foundation has been aware of and worked on now for such a number of years. In particular, one case really struck me forcefully because we had a woman walk into the legal aid office one day who had been a foster parent for this young girl who'd been in her care for a number of years starting when she was a baby, and the foster mother wanted to adopt this little girl. This little girl only knew this woman as her mother. As far as anyone knew, the foster mother was a very good influence. She was a widow, she raised her own children, she was, at that time, what seemed to me thirty years ago, older-- she was like in her early fifties--and she didn't have a lot of money. She had a social security payment, and she had a little bit of domestic work and other money (inaudible), but she provided a very good home for this little girl. And yet the state at that time said: "No, you can't adopt, you're basically a widow, you're basically on your own. You signed a contract to be a foster parent, you can't change your status to be an adoptive parent, we have other people on the list of homes, even though you have had this little girl for more than four years, we are going to remove her and go find another home for her." And that for me was a really incredible injustice. That you would take this child out of a stable home, from the love that she had known, and I was determined to do everything that I could to try to change the foster care system.

So, for a number of years, I worked as a lawyer challenging decisions, working to change the law for Arkansas, working with the Children's Defense Fund and other organizations to change the laws around the country, and it was such a great privilege for me when Bill was elected President to begin to work with people who were equally concerned around the country and in Congress to change our foster care and adoption system. For the last several years we've seen a lot of positive changes, and it's been very gratifying because those changes have been bipartisan, they have represented the best thinking that we can bring to the issues of how we provide our children with stable and loving and permanent homes. Many in this room will remember the tax credits that we were able to get through the Multiethnic Placement Act, which removed some of the barriers to finding permanent homes for children, the Safe Families Adoption Act, which changed the presumption so that some point we were able to say that as sacred as families are, there are some families that have abdicated their rights to their children, and we owe it to the children to move to give them the chance at a better future. So we saw a lot of positive changes, and many in this room worked alongside the administration. You attended events that I hosted at the White House, you came to meetings that we held with experts and foundations that were concerned about this, and advocacy groups, and we also began bringing into the White House foster children, to have events, to try to raise the visibility.

One memorable day, thanks to the very strong patronage of Dave Thomas and the good folks at Wendy's, we brought in children from around the country to speak, and there was a young girl there who at the time was thirteen--she'd been in foster care for seven years--and she read a poem she had written, and it was a very simple poem, it basically said: "All I want is a room of my own and a family that loves me." And shortly after that, because of the raised visibility, she found a family that would do just that for her. But for all the successes that we had we still knew that there were lots of problems. One Valentine's Day, about four years ago, we had a group of foster care children in the Oval Office, and the President, just making conversation with a young boy, said, "Where

do you live?" And he said, "All over," which of course meant: "Nowhere." And then I went, at the invitation of a wonderful group in California called California Connection that is working with foster children, I went to meet with a group of children who are now young men and women, who had aged out of the foster care system or were on the brink of doing so, about three years ago. And for all the years that I have been involved in foster care and working to change laws that prevent foster parents from adopting, working to increase the support and extend health care for children, especially those with special needs, all the things that we had focused on, I have to confess that sitting there listening to twelve or fifteen young people talk about the aging-out process, and the failures that they've encountered in trying to get the independent living services that they needed, was one of the most wrenching experiences I've ever had in public life. You know, because these children were not asking for any special help, they were just, in their own unique ways, explaining what it felt like to have nowhere to go for Thanksgiving after you were no longer in foster care. To have that knock at the door when you were eighteen or graduated from high school, whichever cutoff point your state set, and to have a social worker looking sheepishly down at the ground holding a black plastic garbage bag and saying, "I'm sorry, but it's time for you to move on." Living in emergency rooms because you had nowhere else to go to get out of the cold, bus stations, begging friends, kind teachers to take you in so you could finish high school, it struck me that we have left out an important part of our obligation to these young men and women. We fostered them, but we were not yet ready to really give them the tools they needed to be able to fend for themselves when foster care ended. So we began working on the legislation that we're really celebrating this evening. We knew that there would be people who might wonder whether we could afford to put the additional dollars into the independent living system, to be able to continue the Medicaid and healthcare coverage that so many of these young people needed, to look for ways to encourage states to provide scholarships that would enable a lot of these students to go on to community college and college and pursue their chosen careers, and we were very fortunate that we had, in the House and in the Senate, some real champions of this legislation from the very beginning.

In the Senate, I particularly want to remember the late John Chafey (sp?). You know, when it looked like the bill was stalled for reasons that had nothing to do with the merits of the Senate to (inaudible) the end of the last session. I called Senator Chafey, and we talked about what could be done to (inaudible) to deal with some of the concerns that his fellow Senators had. I talked to him late on a Friday afternoon, the last day before his untimely death. And that was, his staff and wife told me, the last substantive conversation we had, he was so energized, he was sure we were going to get it through the Senate, and I was very gratified when the Senate not only passed it, but did so in his memory. And in the House, we had the (inaudible). We had the dedicated, absolutely committed support of Tom Delay. And I wasn't surprised by that. (applause) Because I have known Congressman Delay's personal commitment, along with his wife and family, to foster care and adoption. The last inauguration the Congressman sat next to my daughter, and I learned more about his strong feelings about family and about the need to give as many children a chance to see what a real family is like, much as my own mother experienced so many years ago. And when it came time to persuade people that this needed to be a priority, he was there, day in and day out. I was very pleased when he

came to a White House event to highlight the need for this, and I think both Tom and I will never forget the extraordinary, moving testimonies we've heard from the young people who would be benefited by this legislation. The extraordinary courage of these men and women, who stood up and talked about what this would mean to them. So, it's a great personal honor, and in many ways for me, a tribute to my mother, to be able to accept this award among so many people who care so deeply about the most vulnerable of our children. Because when we, as a society, intervene into a family to make the most difficult choice anyone is ever called on to make in public life. Be that police officer, or that social worker, or that judge who removes that child from that family, then, in effect, we all become responsible for the future of that young boy or girl. The people who actually provide the love and care in the homes that these children go to and are given a chance to see another side of life really deserve the bulk of the credit. But the Congress has really responded, and we have revolutionized the foster care and adoption laws of our country in the last seven years, and I am very grateful to all of you and very honored to be on the stage with and receive the same award as Tom Delay this evening. Thank you all very much.