

The following talk on the Grad at Grad characteristic, "Committed to Doing Justice," was delivered by Ms. Joann Kusk to the Loyola community at the morning assembly on January 8, 2010.

When Mr. Lyness asked me to talk this morning, I have to be completely honest with you and say that I cringed a little....not because I have difficulties speaking in front of all of you, but because I am not comfortable with giving these "inspirational" type speeches. After all, who am I to talk about my commitment to justice? History gives us many examples of truly great people who were committed to justice: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa immediately spring to mind. As a lifelong student of history, I am often humbled by the people who have dedicated their lives to standing up for others. As a historian, I know how much of a difference one person can make. So, I won't go there; I won't try to be "Role Model Woman." All I ask of you is to remember that this historian is often humbled and inspired by history's great people.

This morning, I would like to talk to you about the *challenge* of continuing to be committed to justice...even when things get a little tough...or even worse, when things just don't seem to get any better in spite of your best efforts. How do you continue to be committed to justice?

New York City is a place of many opportunities but also presents many challenges. I am a native New Yorker and love this beautiful, diverse, fascinating, energetic city. But the city that I love is also very complicated. It is a city of extremes – extreme wealth, power, privilege, and prestige existing side by side with poverty, desperation, disenfranchisement, and loneliness. This is something that I see acted out every time I go downtown to Tompkins Square Park with my troop of Loyola Brownbaggers.

Tompkins Square Park represents to me all that I love about my city, but also, all that causes me to despair.

Tompkins Square Park is situated in the East Village in an area that has become gentrified over the past 20 odd years. The houses that surround the park have been renovated, luxury apartment buildings have been popping up all over the area, and there are tons of trendy bistros, shops, and galleries on almost every street. It is an exciting and very cool place to be. But there is another side to Tompkins Square Park and this side is illustrated by the people I see in the Park.

These are the people who congregate along the fringes of the park. You will see them sitting on the benches with their heads down. You will see them silently lined up along the fences of the park waiting for a Church group, or our Brownbaggers to hand out food. You may see them sitting mute under trees. They are not there to buy organic produce from the farmer's market. They are not playing with their children. They are not romping with their pets in the enclosed dog runs. They are the people on the fringe of the park and the fringe of our society. Some of them are elderly, some are struggling with addiction, some are runaways, some of them are mentally ill. They come in all shapes, sizes, colors, and age groups. One thing that I have noticed is that they are all generally quiet; staying out of our way, shy about their situation, apprehensive towards strangers.

I have been watching these people for the past 15 years, which is how long I have been bringing our Brownbaggers downtown to Tompkins Square Park. I wish I could tell you that things have gotten better since we first started going to Tompkins Square Park, but unfortunately things have actually gotten worse. There are more people than ever out there waiting for those lunches we give out. There are more children and more elderly people. I should not be surprised by this because all the city agency statistics that I read tell me that the two fastest growing groups of the poor are children and elderly people – but those statistics take on a different meaning when you are staring them right in the face. So, I am challenged by this every time we go down to the park and sometimes feel like we are really not making a difference at all.

Our last Brownbaggers outing presented even more challenges. On December 12th, 23 students headed out with me on a bitterly cold day to make our way down to the park. On this particular day, not too many people were out in the park. We got the chance to talk to a couple of men who were sitting on benches along the park. I knew them as some of our regulars and they recognized us, so they were willing to talk to us for a little bit. One man seemed a little agitated. He said he was embarrassed by his situation and that he needed to take food from us. He seemed almost a little angry. He challenged us to think about what we were doing there handing out lunches. Were we there to make ourselves feel better? Were we looking down on him and his friends? What were our motives? This man really needed us to recognize his feelings and to acknowledge his dignity. Even though he was literally in our faces, it was important lesson. I noticed two very interesting things as this man was speaking to us. The first was how well all of my Brownbaggers were responding to his words – the kids were listening with compassion; they were not angry or afraid – this made me feel proud. The second interesting thing that I noticed was that the other men on the bench kept talking to me assuring me that they did not feel the same way as their friend. They

were afraid of offending us. Maybe they were afraid that we would not come back, or maybe they did not want to discourage us. Even though these other men were also down on their luck and in need of our help, they were concerned about our feelings - I was moved by this and assured them that we would see them soon.

On the way back to Loyola after our long, cold day, we were in for one last challenge. The train door opened at 68th Street and a man began making his way down along our car, crawling on his hands. This man had lost both of his legs. He was crawling along the floor with a coffee can in one hand. Most people on the train ignored him; they were probably a little uncomfortable by his struggle. However, some people reached down to give him money. I reached into my coat pocket, grabbed the money that was there and bent down to say hello to him as I gave him my money. He smiled in spite of his struggles and I thought to myself that I have absolutely nothing to complain about in my life. At that moment, a man who was sitting near me began to yell at everyone on our car. This man also looked like he was a bit down on his luck. He chastised everyone on the train for ignoring the man who was struggling at our feet. He kept saying that we were all bad people for ignoring the sufferings of our brothers and sisters. He kept saying it over and over again. I thought to myself: "The Lord certainly is not being subtle with His lessons today." So, what exactly are the lessons to be learned from this day? I came to the conclusion that the man struggling on the floor was another reminder that all people have a dignity about them even when they are struggling and all people need to be listened to even when they are angry, ranting, and come off sounding less than sympathetic.

What have I learned from the challenges associated with running Brownbaggers for the past 15 years? I'll sum it all up with 3 words: Faith, Hope, and Commitment.

I work in a school that is a Faith Community. We encourage our students to walk with the poor as comrades, as brothers and sisters. Being in this community allows me to run a program like Brownbaggers and I am grateful for that.

I see glimmers of Hope anytime a colleague gives up a Saturday to help me out, or when someone remembers to ask me how Brownbaggers went first thing Monday morning when I walk into the Faculty Room. I see Hope when I notice that my students are still smiling, even on a bitterly cold Saturday that was fraught with challenges. I see Hope when I learn that one of our Loyola families has actually started a Brownbaggers program in their parish in Brooklyn and their efforts have brought a whole other faith community together who are committed to justice.

I see Commitment on the part of students who continue to give up their Saturdays for Brownbaggers, even after they have already fulfilled their required

hours. I see Commitment on the part of the Brownbaggers Team Leaders who keep coming back all of their four years here at Loyola to help out on all those Saturdays. I see Commitment from our Alumni who continue to volunteer on our Service Day long after they have graduated. I see Commitment from our students, colleagues, and parents who continue to support our drives each year.

So, tomorrow when the Brownbaggers go out again, I won't complain too much about the weather or worry about whatever adventures we may encounter because I know that thanks to this community, I can meet any challenge with Faith and with Hope.

Thank you for listening and for all that you do.