

Mr. Speaker, this last Sunday one of America's grandest ladies turned 97 years old. And tonight it is a sincere privilege for me to stand here in this well to speak a few words of heartfelt tribute to a woman whose impact on three generations of children will be felt in the human family I believe even after this Chamber is dust.

I knew this special lady as Mrs. Freeman. Four decades have passed since I gathered my belongings as a fourth grader and left the warmth and safety of her classroom for the very last time. As we all reflect on our childhood, I suppose each of us has that one teacher in our memory who affected our lives more than any other. My memory of her is always that of a truly warm and elegant lady who completely personified class, dignity, and grace.

Mrs. Freeman was the model teacher that I believe every teacher truly aspires to be. She made books come alive in class. She made every lesson exciting, every life was important. She made us realize that each of us had an important part to play that only we could play. This gracious lady encouraged us to pursue a standard of integrity simply by the way she lived. And in those times when we disappointed her, Mr. Speaker, she never failed to correct us truthfully but gently, and she was always willing to forgive us and to affirm that we were fully restored in her eyes.

While there were so many ways that the guidance of Mrs. Freeman prepared me for life, perhaps the greatest gift I ever received from her and have carried with me through all these years was that of her words of encouragement. I may never have come to this Chamber at all, Mr. Speaker, without some of the soul-lifting things that she said to me. And I am convinced that not a day goes by that I am not affected by those words.

And I can say to you, Mr. Speaker, that not a day ever went by in her class that did not include a moment when Mrs. Freeman looked into the eyes of one of her students and, with a warm smile and a loving wink, she would utter those simple words "You can do it." I know without a doubt that mine was only one of hundreds of lives that were changed forever by those magnificent words, not only because they empowered and encouraged but because we each knew that she meant those words from the depth and core of her soul.

There were many other lessons she left us with that I have greatly cherished on this road to the United States Congress. When one of us would be left out, she would come along beside us and encourage us with that authentically gracious and generous spirit that characterized her life. When my home burned down, Mr. Speaker, taking nearly every material belonging I had, including my school books, and leaving me feeling a little lost, it was Mrs. Freeman that reminded me that God had spared all of my family and that the rest really didn't matter. And I knew then and I know now more than ever that she was so very right.

She also taught me through school plays just to speak my lines sincerely from my heart, and I seek to do that even tonight, Mr. Speaker. Few gifts could have served me better over these many years.

When I first ran for the United States Congress, this sweet lady made the trip to attend one of the major events supporting my candidacy. She made a campaign contribution and included a note that ended with those words, "You can do it."

But a narrow loss in that election, Mr. Speaker, was a deep disappointment. And still I received a letter from her shortly afterward, and once again she offered hope and encouragement that I will cherish as long as I live. But it was her last five words that I remember most. They were the hallmark phrase of Marguerite Freeman, teacher of truth and loving encourager to children. Her letter closed with those words, "You can still do it."

Mother Theresa once said, "Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are endless." Mr. Speaker, if Mrs. Freeman could be here in this Chamber tonight, I would say to her something like this: that words fail me to express the loving impact that you have had on my life and so many others. And I truly believe that this generation and many generations to come will inherit the beauty and legacy of those endless echoes of your encouragement that you cast into the hearts of so many of those children whose priceless gift it was to call you teacher. Beloved and gallant lady, may God bless you forever.