

The White House

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Remarks by the President at Presentation of the 2011 Presidential Citizens Medals

East Room

2:25 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. (Applause.) Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the White House. This is one of my favorite events. We are here to recognize the winners of the Citizens Medal, one of the highest honors a civilian can receive. This is the second year the nomination process has been open to the public, and I notice that once again the women outnumber the men. (Laughter.) I'm beginning to see a pattern here.

You know, on Sunday, I helped dedicate the National Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial. And this afternoon, as I'm spending time with these extraordinary people, I'm reminded of the fact that during the last speech that Dr. King ever gave, he retold the story of the Good Samaritan. And most of you know the story. We know it begins with a man lying injured on a road. And Dr. King said that the first people who saw him asked themselves, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" So they made excuses for not stopping. They said the man was faking his injury, or it wasn't their problem.

But according to Dr. King, the Good Samaritan reversed the question. "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

The 13 Americans that we honor today have all faced in their own ways the moment that Dr. King described -- that Good Samaritan moment when you see a neighbor in need and you have to ask yourself the question. They come from different backgrounds and they've devoted their lives to different causes, but they are united by the choice that they've made. They could have made excuses for doing nothing. Instead, they chose to help.

For many of them, a lifelong mission began with a small act of kindness. In 1987, a single mom and her child -- her children -- moved in across the street from Ida Martin. Ida saw their refrigerator was empty, except for a bottle of water, so she brought them groceries. And I guess once she got started, she couldn't stop. (Laughter.) So last year, the organization she founded answered nearly 22,000 requests for aid.

Then there's Milly Bloomquist, from Penn Yan, New York. And for decades, she has personified the phrase, "above and beyond." At her 90th birthday party, one speaker said that Penn Yan has its own special system for handling emergencies. "If you're out of food, call Milly. If your heat has gone out, call Milly. If you can't pay your electricity bill, call Milly. If you need a winter coat, call Milly."

The right choice is rarely the easy one. And for some of those we honor here today, the choice to help was especially hard because it came in the wake of tragedy. Steve and Liz Alderman lost their son Peter on 9/11. Roger Kemp's daughter, Ali, was murdered nearly a decade ago. Janice Langbehn was denied the right to visit her partner, Lisa, as she lay dying in the hospital.

As a father and husband, I can't begin to imagine the grief that they must have felt in that moment -- their anger and their sense that the world was not fair. But they refused to let that anger define them. They each became, in Janice's words, an "accidental activist." And thanks to their work, there are parents and partners who will never have to go through what they went through.

Now, I'm happy to say that there was a pretty stiff competition for these medals. Citizens from all walks of life submitted nearly 6,000 nominations online, and it took us four months to select the winners. In the end, these 13 individuals were chosen not just for the work they do, but for the example that they set.

Over the past year, we've been reminded time and time again that our lives can be altered by events beyond our control. A tornado or a hurricane can devastate a community. An earthquake halfway around the world can threaten businesses here at home. An economic crisis that begins in one corner of the housing market can spread to leave millions of Americans out of work.

So we don't always get to choose the challenges that we face. But how we respond is entirely up to us. We are each on that Good Samaritan road, the road that Dr. King spoke of more than 40 years ago. We can see that there are people who need our help. And while we come from different backgrounds, we all face the same, simple question: Will we help them, or will we not?

In some ways, in these difficult times, it's easier than ever to walk on by. We can tell ourselves: "I've got enough problems of my own." "I can't make a big enough difference." "If my neighbors are less fortunate, maybe it's their fault." But as Americans, that's not who we are. Because while, yes, we are a nation of individuals, we're also a community. I am my brother's keeper. I am my sister's keeper. That's a creed we all share.

So this afternoon, I am proud to share the stage with these extraordinary citizens. I also know that for our government to truly honor them, we have to do more than hand out medals. We have to follow their example. And that won't always be easy. As individuals, as communities, and as a country, we all face the temptation to find excuses not to help. In these decisive moments, then, we need to choose between doing something and doing nothing. And I hope we will remember the stories of these extraordinary men and women as we make that choice. I hope they inspire us to put ourselves in another person's shoes. And I hope that years from now, when they retell the story of our time, they will say that we, too, lent a hand to our neighbor in need.

I should just point out that a few people -- like Molly -- when I said we could not be prouder of what they've accomplished, bristled a little bit and said, "I'm not done yet." (Laughter.) So these guys are still out there making a difference. And they'll be right there with us if we end up doing the right thing. All right?

So congratulations to all of the winners of the Citizens Medal. I've got some outstanding military aides here, and one of them is going to read the citations, one at a time, and then I'll present a medal to each of the honorees. (Applause.)

(The citations are read and the medals are presented.)

MILITARY AIDE: The Presidential Citizens Medal recipients:

Stephen and Elizabeth Alderman: When Stephen and Elizabeth Alderman lost their youngest child, Peter, on September 11, 2001, they resolved to make his legacy one of peace. They established a foundation in Peter's name to mend the emotional wounds of terrorism and mass violence. Together they have trained health workers around the world and provided trauma treatment to the people of post-conflict nations, giving a face to American compassion. The United States honors Stephen and Elizabeth Alderman for their work to replace hatred with hope and healing. (Applause.)

Clarence Lee Alexander: A dedicated patriot and conservationist, Clarence Lee Alexander has helped lead the charge in protecting the Yukon River Watershed. In addition to working to save our waterways, he has been instrumental in saving lives through the Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments, which provides health care to some of the most remote villages in North America. He exemplifies the difference one person can make in preserving our natural resources and cherished traditions for the next generation of Americans. For his work to protect our precious national treasures, the United States honors Clarence Lee Alexander. (Applause.)

Camilla Bloomquist: Camilla Bloomquist's mission to alleviate hunger in her community began more than 40 years ago, when she helped start a breakfast program at a local elementary school. Since then, she has founded Food for the Needy to provide assistance to the less fortunate, and Christmas for the Needy to supply families with food, gifts, toys, and coats during the holiday season. She has been a life-sustaining and legendary force in her community, and her efforts embody the enduring American spirit of generosity. The United States honors Milly Bloomquist for her extraordinary dedication to taking on poverty in our nation. (Applause.)

Dr. Judith Broder: After Dr. Judith Broder attended a play produced and performed by active duty Marines, she left the theatre with a new calling. Moved by the realistic portrayals of the traumas of war, she founded The Soldiers Project to help service members and their families address the overwhelming effects of service-related mental health issues. Today, Dr. Broder's work supports the well-being of our nation's heroes and ensures they have access to important mental health services. For answering the call to honor our troops and their families, the United States honors Dr. Judith Broder. (Applause.)

John Keaveney: After serving our country in Vietnam, John Keaveney faced setbacks that affect too many American veterans. With the help of a Department of Veterans Affairs program, he overcame addiction and homelessness, turned away from crime, and committed himself to providing a support system for others returning from war. He founded New Directions, and since 1992, has devoted himself to lifting up the lives of thousands of veterans in Los Angeles County. The United States honors John Keaveney for helping America fulfill its promise to serve our veterans as well as they have served us. (Applause.)

Roger Kemp: Roger Kemp lived every father's worst nightmare when his daughter, Ali, was taken at a young age. Through immeasurable pain and grief, Roger devoted his energy to building a safer world for future generations. His foundation has provided women of all ages with valuable self-defense training, and his billboard campaign to post the faces of wanted criminals has led to multiple arrests, including the conviction of Ali's killer. The United States honors Roger Kemp for his unwavering efforts to ensure the safety of his fellow citizens. (Applause.)

Janice Langbehn: Janice Langbehn transformed her own profound loss into a resounding call for compassion and equality. When the woman she loved, Lisa Pond, suddenly suffered a brain aneurysm, Janice and her children were denied the right to stand beside her in her final moments. Determined to spare others from similar injustice, Janice spoke out and helped ensure that same-sex couples can support and comfort each other through some of life's toughest trials. The United States honors Janice Langbehn for advancing America's promise of equality for all. (Applause.)

Ida Martin: When Ida Martin realized the needs of working families and senior citizens in her community were not being met, she took matters into her own hands. Out of her garage, she founded Bluffton Self Help to provide aid to community members in urgent need of food, clothing, and short-term assistance. Over 20 years later, she continues to be guided by her devotion to helping those who desire to help themselves, and her organization remains a vital resource for those in need. For her remarkable efforts on behalf of those less fortunate, the United States honors Ida Martin. (Applause.)

Dr. Margaret Martin: Believing in the notion that every child should have the chance to learn and grow through the power of music, Dr. Margaret Martin founded Harmony Project. For 10 years, she has provided free instruments and music lessons, and built neighborhood youth orchestras for some of the most underserved areas of Los Angeles. The United States honors Dr. Margaret Martin for shining a light on the tremendous talents and potential of young Americans and for empowering our children to reach for a brighter tomorrow. (Applause.)

Michelle McIntyre-Brewer: The wife of a soldier and mother of two, Michelle McIntyre-Brewer represents the best of our country. As an advocate for military families, she supports our men and women in uniform through numerous organizations, including Soldier's List, which she founded in 2002 to send packages to thousands of deployed troops. Despite the many challenges she has faced in her own life, Michelle remains focused on her mission to improve the lives of others. For ensuring we uphold our obligation to those who defend our freedoms, the United States honors Michelle McIntyre-Brewer. (Applause.)

Roberto Perez: For more than four decades, Roberto Perez has dedicated his time and passion to bringing the gift of literacy to communities around the world. Through his leadership of Alfalit International, he has helped provide basic education opportunities to underserved youth and adults in 23 countries on three continents. From the barrios of Miami to the villages of Africa and the pueblos of South America, he has guided a force of more than 6,000 volunteers in delivering independence through education. For his caring spirit and dedication to serving others, the United States honors Roberto Perez. (Applause.)

Sujata and Nirmala Emani, accepting on behalf of their mother, Vijaya Emani: Breaking long-held taboos, Vijaya Emani lent her voice to protect Indian-American women from domestic violence. Taken from us far too soon, she was a trailblazer who shared her personal story to help other battered women overcome abusive relationships. With boundless energy and an insatiable drive to serve her community, she threw herself into numerous causes, from supporting single parents to honoring India's cultural heritage. The United States honors Vijaya Emani for her many contributions to the people of Cleveland and our nation. (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: What a remarkable group of Americans.

I want to thank all of you for joining us here today. All the friends and family who are here to celebrate our Citizens Medal winners, because I think that -- not to speak for them, but I suspect they'd say that they couldn't have done what they did without the incredible support of all the people who are here. The colleagues and the loved ones who submitted nominations online -- I'm sure they're appreciative. And obviously you made a pretty convincing case.

I think our honorees recognize that our work is not yet done. And so I just want to repeat, I hope that their incredible work ends up setting an example for all of us, both in public service and in our daily lives.

And I know that some folks today who are here also represent the Corporation for National and Community Service. Every day, you help Americans make their country a better place, and I want to thank all of you for your hard work.

So, with that, we've got, my understanding is, some pretty good food here -- (laughter) -- maybe even a little music -- as we celebrate these extraordinary individuals. Please give them one more big round of applause. (Applause.)

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2:37 P.M. EDT