Susan P. Curnan – Remarks and Reminiscence
Unveiling of the Sculpted Bronze of Eleanor Roosevelt
“First Lady of the World”

April 11, 2016

Altman Amphitheater Classroom, G1
The Heller School for Social Policy & Management
Brandeis University

Eleanor Roosevelt: Art • Activism • Social Justice

Welcome distinguished guests. Family of professional sculpture Rose Schechet Miller, President Lynch, Dean Krauss, Faculty, Staff, Students, friends of Val-Kill, and University Trustees. It is wonderful to see a full house here today.

Thank you Dianne Miller Wolman – the artist’s daughter and Brandeis class of 1967, for arranging this wonderful gift to Brandeis and for choosing the Heller School location. “First Lady of the World”, the name given to Eleanor Roosevelt by President Harry Truman, is an extraordinary sculptured bronze of Eleanor Roosevelt by Newton artist, your mother, Rose Schechet Miller. I understand it is one of the three castings, born of the artist’s grief at the death of Eleanor Roosevelt in November 1962. Rose’s words were reported in the Newton News:

“She (ER) was always there helping other people making sure everyone was taken care of... she was part of my life for all of my life.... It was like losing a member of my family.” This is a sentiment shared by so many people around the world and in this room. The music playing as you walked into the room today, “Heroes” by Ann Reed, captures some of that – in another art form.

“Heroes
Appear like a friend
To clear a path or light the flame
As time goes by you find you depend
On your heroes to show you the way”¹

As Blanche Wiesen Cook, author of the definitive biography of Eleanor Roosevelt, and the next President Clinton have said, “Everybody as an ER story!”

I have received many emails from colleagues with regrets that they could not be here today to share their stories.

* * *

This is one of 3 castings – each has a unique and proper home. The first is in Norvelt, PA. Originally named Westmoreland Homestead, it was the largest of FDR’s model subsistence homesteads that provided relief for displaced miners and industrial workers during the New Deal. On May 21, 1937, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited the homestead. She said while there, “I am no believer in paternalism. I do not like charities,” and she went on to say that cooperative communities offered an alternative to “our rather settled ideas” and could “provide equality of opportunity for all....” The residents were so taken with Eleanor Roosevelt’s personal attention, they named the town in her honor using the last syllables of her first and last names: EleaNOR RooseVELT.

The second casting was unveiled by the artist at the University of California San Diego upon the dedication of a college named for Eleanor Roosevelt in 1995. Hillary Clinton paid homage to her White House “soul-mate,” as represented in the local paper at the time, and urged students to heed the First Lady’s call to public service, “In this age of unbridled cynicism,” she said, “there’s probably no better time than now to rekindle the values and ideals of Eleanor and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.”

And now, a home at last for the third. A short time before her death, Rose directed that “The First Lady of the World” go to Brandeis and specifically to Heller. We are grateful for how this work of art enhances Eleanor Roosevelt’s visibility and legacy on this campus. Thank you again.

You may know, Eleanor Roosevelt was a Trustee of the school from 1949 until her death and a faculty member teaching in general education and International Relations. She taught on the campus for the exact same years as Leonard Bernstein. Imagine the first commencement in 1952, Eleanor Roosevelt as the University’s Commencement speaker (she received an honorary degree) with Leonard Bernstein conducting the ceremonial music. Eleanor Roosevelt filmed the PBS show “Prospects of Mankind” on the Brandeis campus, including three visits with John F. Kennedy: When he was running for President of the United States; when launching the Peace Corps; and again for a most fascinating discussion with Eleanor Roosevelt on “The Status of Women”. All available in the Brandeis Archives.

Today, I want to weave a story of Eleanor Roosevelt’s lesser known connections to art, activism, and social justice.
Writing in her “My Day” column in 1961, Eleanor Roosevelt said that... “gratitude for artists fills my heart – they can speak through their art to the souls of people where the rest of us have to stand tongue-tied because we lack the means to communicate.”

This quote reveals a hint of her humility as a servant citizen leader and trail blazer. Though one would hardly think of Eleanor Roosevelt as tongue-tied! Consider two small examples:

- When a reporter asked if Eleanor Roosevelt always sat at the head of the table – the answer shot back, “Wherever she sits is the head of the table.”
- In the White House elevator, when the white-gloved steward greeted her and she reached for the lever, the steward said in no uncertain terms, “First Ladies do not operate the elevator.” She said, “They do now.”

Her “My Day” column also hints at why, under the New Deal, Edward Bruce, Director of the public Works of Art Project (PWAP, 1933) wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt that he and his wife “always think of you as the Patron Saint of our movement. It was you who graced the first step that was taken to start the movement for artists and since that time, I am happy to tell you how splendidly it has resulted.”

Under the New Deal, artists were put to work creating murals in public spaces, artwork in civic buildings, community centers and so on.

Bruce lifted up the often hidden and important role Eleanor Roosevelt played in the formation of these programs as well as her advocacy for the fine arts in American culture with repeated emphasis on the role of art in civic life – the connection between making and participating, the appreciation of beauty in simple things, and art as a means to connect individuals to a larger national narrative.

The fundamental emphasis on the artists as both the recorder of social ills and dreamer of new realities remained constant throughout her advocacy.

One of my favorites is a painting, “An Incident in Contemporary American Life”. This rich painting depicted the 1939 Easter Sunday concert given by African-American contralto Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial. There’s a long history to this “incident” – e.g., Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from the DAR (Daughters of the Revolution) after they refused to allow Marian Anderson to sing in their building, Constitution Hall in Washington, DC, which was the biggest concert venue in DC at the time. DC was still segregated. In her letter to the DAR, she wrote that “they had the opportunity to lead in an enlightened way but had failed to do so” therefore “I am resigning.” And she arranged for the contralto to sing in the Lincoln Memorial to thousands.

Before I leave my remarks about Eleanor Roosevelt and the arts – I want to acknowledge what a beautiful coincidence it is that we have this celebratory unveiling just as the campus prepares
for the “Festival of the Arts” – an annual Brandeis event. This year, the theme “Shout the Big Dreams” honors Leonard Bernstein, Trustee Emeritus until his death in 1990. He said, “It is the artists of the world, the feelers and the thinkers, who will ultimately save us; who can articulate, educate, defy, insist, sing and shout the big dreams.”

Again – can you imagine that 1st Brandeis Commencement? Eleanor Roosevelt at the podium, Bernstein conducting – wow. It has been said, “When history is being bade and I am present, I miss the significance.” I wonder what the class of ’52 made of that.

This is a place of BIG dreams:

Brandeis University was known from the start as a “Young University in a Hurry”. It still is! Louis Brandeis said, “The most important political office is that of the private citizen.” 1948 Time Magazine remarked on Eleanor Roosevelt’s enormous capacity to influence social change and called her leadership as “citizenship fix-it”.

Founding President Abram Sachar said of Eleanor Roosevelt in the book, A Host at Last, “We had a genuine love affair with a woman of valor whose price is above rubies and upon whose tongue is the law of kindness.”

She helped a lot.

Also, from President Sachar’s book, “One of our most effective patrons was Eleanor Roosevelt, especially when she joined our Board of Trustees and our part-time faculty. She willingly undertook special assignments either by addressing our functions or by conferring with families whose support we sought. One day, I learned from Oscar Kolin, the nephew of Helena Rubinstein, the queen of a vast cosmetics empire, that she was ready to endow a chair in chemistry at the university. She asked for one privilege, to make the pledge personally to Eleanor Roosevelt. I called Mrs. Roosevelt, explained that I would not ordinarily intrude on her crowded schedule, but that a visit to Helena Rubinstein’s apartment to take tea with her would confirm a very generous endowment for the university. Mrs. Roosevelt’s response was almost a reflect action: ‘I would go to China if it meant such a service to the university.’ En route, Mrs. Roosevelt asked innocently, ‘By the way, who is Helena Rubinstein?’ The two ladies met and spent a delightful hour discussing their world travels, after which the commitment was made for the Helena Rubinstein Chair in Chemistry.” Interim Provost Irv Epstein held this Chair from 1989-94.

Back to graduation – the times were discouraging. It was the Korean War. Class valedictorian Gus Ranis (deceased Oct. 2013) went on to be in leading development economist at Yale. Having heard his speech at the time, Eleanor Roosevelt discarded her prepared speech and spoke from the heart hoping to inspire the discouraged graduates. She invited graduates to “Set your corner of the world on fire” with action and change for the betterment. This phrase is
on the T-Shirts worn by Brandeis’ Eleanor Roosevelt Fellows today. She said things like (in the
voice of Eleanor Roosevelt): “It’s your life, but only if you make it so.” And “Courage is so much
more exhilarating than fear – and in the long run, it is easier – you must do the thing you think
you cannot do....”

Continuing her productive relationship with Brandeis, she launched “Prospects of Mankind” –
produced by National Education TV, forerunner of PBS from 1959-62 on the Brandeis campus.
The first episode recorded the week of Eleanor Roosevelt’s 75th birthday and the last episode
was recorded just months before Eleanor Roosevelt’s death in 1962. Guests on the monthly
series included: John F. Kennedy, Henry Kissinger, Edward R. Murrow, Bertrand Russell, and
Adlai Stevenson.

John F. Kennedy appeared 3 times: Hours after announcing his U.S. Presidential candidacy
(1960); to announce the creation of the Peace Corps (1961) and to discuss the status of women
(1962). All recorded at Brandeis University.

Of course the achievement the First Lady is perhaps best known for was her pivotal role in
drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (drafted in 1948, the same year Brandeis
University was founded), and its final language vividly reflects her humanitarian ideals and
uncompromising commitment to the inherent worth of every human being.2 There were 7
formal drafts completed in NYC, Geneva and other venues. Between drafts, she worked on the
Declaration at Val-Kill – her private retreat (where by birth, by choice and by chance, I grew up
and spent the first 20 years of my life). To see her influence, let’s compare the drafts of the First
Article of the Declaration. Anyone know it? Response from audience: “All human beings are
born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

She set the standard by which all future human rights charters would be judged.

The initial text of the First Article was written as, “All men, being members of one family are
free, possess equal dignity and rights, and shall regard each other as brothers.” 3 With the
influence of Eleanor Roosevelt, Article 1 ultimately became, “All human beings are born free
and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act
towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

Critical changes with huge impact on the world. One of the many mentionable Eleanor
Roosevelt quotes is, “If you have to compromise, compromise up!” Article 1 offers a beautiful
example.

---

2 “A Proclamation for Eleanor Roosevelt Day, 2000” by the President of the United States of America, Oct. 11,
2000.
I have two short stories from my personal history with the Roosevelts to once again connect art, activism and social justice, especially related to matters of diversity and inclusion:

- My first experience meeting people different than me was picnics with the boys from the Wiltwick School, a residential school for mostly African-American and some Puerto Rican adolescent boys from New York City. Eleanor Roosevelt hosted picnics at Val-Kill, always fun. It was often set to the music of beautifully decorated steel ESSO oil drums with frequent guest Harry Belafonte who, with Eleanor Roosevelt, served on the Board of the School.

- One Sunday when I was about 10, I met Jewish people for the first time. I was invited to breakfast, and afterward, Eleanor Roosevelt asked me what I observed/learned about our Jewish guests. I knew it was important to answer, though I wasn’t sure of what to say. I told her, “They eat round bread, smelly fish and read the New York Times.” “Good,” she said, “you are very observant.” Later, I realized the Jewish guests were Armand Hammer – industrialist and philanthropist – and Victor Hammer of the Hammer Art Galleries, collectors of Russian and Chinese art, “citizens for diplomacy” for world peace. Focused on the “Triple Bottom Line” before its time.

Closing words from the first President Clinton (!) from the Proclamation declaring Eleanor Roosevelt Day, her birthday, October 11, 2000:

“Whether working for the United Nations, the NAACP, the Girl Scouts, the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, or the National Conference of Christians and Jews, Eleanor Roosevelt devoted her boundless energy to creating a world defined by respect for and dedication to democratic values. She was a woman ahead of her time, and her achievements transcend her generation. As we seek to chart a steady course for America, democracy, and human rights in this new century, we need only look to her values, character, and accomplishments to provide us with an unfailing moral compass.”

Now, thanks to the Eleanor Roosevelt bronze in our lobby, we can ask, “What would Eleanor do?” whenever we face a challenge.

After all, Hillary Clinton is known to talk to Eleanor Roosevelt. So can we! Secretary Clinton is the founding chair of the Eleanor Roosevelt Val-Kill Partnership and continues to invest her time and energy in preserving Val-Kill as you will now see in this wonderful short film, “Close to Home” by filmmaker Anne Makepeace, 2006.

---

Remarks Draft/4.12.16

Thank you all.
MONDAY, APRIL 11, 2016 AT NOON

Please join us for the

Dedication of the Eleanor Roosevelt Sculpture

“First Lady of the World”

a gift from Artist Rose Shechet Miller

PROGRAM

NOON - THE HELLER SCHOOL SCHNEIDER BUILDING, ALTMAN AMPHITHEATER CLASSROOM G1

Welcome
Interim Dean Marty W. Krauss, Ph.D. ’81

Remarks &
Reminiscences of Eleanor Roosevelt
Prof. Susan P. Curnan, author of several articles on growing up with Eleanor Roosevelt in the 1950s and 60s. Recently featured in a documentary for National Parks and Presidential Library Archives 2014.

Short Film “Close to Home”, by filmmaker Anne Makepeace, highlighting Eleanor Roosevelt’s dedication to social justice & racial equality.

12:45 PM - HELLER-BROWN LOBBY

Unveiling of the Eleanor Roosevelt Bust
& Remarks by the artist’s daughter, Dianne Miller Wolman ’67, on behalf of the artist’s family

Please RSVP to Lanni Isenberg, lanni@brandeis.edu, by Monday, April 4th.