

**1994 International Conference  
on Volunteer Administration**

**Association for Volunteer Administration  
Harriet Naylor Distinguished Member Award  
Acceptance Speech**

**October 8, 1994**

**Billie Ann Myers**

*At the 1994 Conference on Volunteer Administration in Anaheim, California, Billie Ann Myers was presented with the Harriet Naylor Distinguished Member Service Award.*

*Ms. Myers has been an AVA member since 1985, and was formerly the director of the Arkansas Division of Volunteerism as well as the administrator of the Delta Service Corps, the largest model for national and community service in the United States. As Director of the Arkansas Division of Volunteerism, Ms. Myers founded a volunteer council of volunteer managers, called the Spirit of 110, from all state agencies. She also assisted in establishing the Department of Human Service Volunteer Clearinghouse, which recruits and places volunteers within the department.*

*The extent of Ms. Myers's influence in the field of volunteer administration extends beyond the borders of Arkansas. She is chair of the National Assembly of State Offices of Volunteerism and serves in the National Governor's Association Study Group on Youth and Community Service. Her leadership and support made it possible for several states to create their own state offices of volunteerism.*

*She also serves on the National and Community Service Act Coalition Steering Committee and was consulted extensively during the drafting process of President Clinton's National Service Initiative.*

Thank you for this honor and thank you for being here to share this time with me. All of us appreciate recognition. Recognition from peers whom I love and respect is the highest form of recognition for me. I want to thank Jamie Henderson, from Wichita Falls, Texas, for nominating me for this prestigious award. There are many people responsible for my being here today and I will not be able to name them all. Some are in this room, many are back in Arkansas, or in other states and nations, and some have gone on to other worlds. There is someone I want to single out to include in this recognition: Dub Myers, my husband and best friend for forty-two years. Thank you, honey, for giving me roots for security and stability, and wings to freely fly, and for believing in me even when I didn't believe in myself.

I am grateful that receiving this award requires an acceptance speech. It forced me to focus on the important thought I want to emphasize today. I had great fun rereading the speeches of former distinguished members and benefiting once again from their wonderful wisdom and wit. I did a lot of soul-searching and sifting to get to today. Susan Ellis reminded us in her acceptance speech in 1989 that this award is given for contributions made on behalf of AVA. This started me thinking about my relationship with and debt to AVA. I thought about all the truths I have learned from colleagues in AVA and in the broader volunteer field. From Harriet Naylor I learned that being a pioneer is a powerful but sometimes lonely job; from Ivan Scheier I learned the value of vision and the need for leaders to be keepers of the vision; from Laura Lee Geraghty I learned how to lead a state office of volunteerism to be a driving force for change and still survive; from Sue Vine-

yard and Steve McCurley I learned that mutual trust and confidence are essential in establishing long-distance partnerships (or any kind of relationship, really); from Marlene Wilson I learned about the two faces of power and how important it is to be comfortable with having power; from Joanne Patton I learned that persistence and commitment are necessary characteristics to change government; from Katie Noyes Campbell I learned the importance of being willing to pick up the reins and move forward even when the occasion is unexpected; and ... from the staff of the Arkansas Division of Volunteerism and the Delta Service Corps, the volunteer field in Arkansas and AVA Region IV, I learned about loyalty, cooperation, and teamwork that minimizes conflict and turf battles and maximizes effort and production; and from all of the world's volunteer force I have learned that it is not foolish to expect the impossible.

How many of us remember the first AVA conference we attended? Good. The first conference I attended was in 1981 in Philadelphia. That conference had an enormous impact on what I would do in the coming years. For the first time I heard Harriet Naylor, Ivan Sheier, Marlene Wilson, and Eva Shindler-Rainman, and participated in a creative workshop designed by Susan Ellis. It was also the first time I worked on national service issues.

How many of us have children or grandchildren under the age of 21? Wonderful, we have an enormous investment in the future. Dub and I have three grandchildren: 20, 17, and 5. They give us hope for and confidence in the future.

How many of us have parents 70 or older? Aren't they wonderful! My parents are 80 and 84, and they taught me about responsibility, honesty, truth, and love. They provided us with a sense of ourselves in history and they gave us a model for life from which we can pick and choose to create our own model for the next generation.

It is because our children and grandchildren give us hope for the future, our parents have given us a foundation, and our colleagues share their wisdom and expertise, that most of us feel an obligation to leave the world a better place for our having been there.

John Mason, another fine AVA member, once asked me the question: "If you had only one opportunity to pass on the important truths in your life, what would you say?" So, John, if you are listening, here's what I'd say...

If we are to have a better world it will have to be built community by community and it will have to start with us, individually. If we want a world community that is friendly not hostile, cooperative not competitive, love-filled not hate-filled, then things will have to change, like the kaleidoscope of our conference theme. And where does the change begin? It has to begin with you and me, for the only thing I can really change is me, and the only thing you can change is you. We can't change each other, we can only model the way we want the world to be and trust that our example will encourage others to risk making change happen.

Maybe this is an example of what I am thinking: In a small town in Arkansas, a young boy about six years old who had severe physical challenges—we will call him Jimmy—was preparing to enter regular first grade. It was the second week of February and his family had just moved to this town. Jimmy was excited about starting to school, but his mother was apprehensive because she knew people could be cruel. Valentine's Day was just a week away, and Jimmy's excitement grew day by day as he and his mother made his valentine box and bought cards on which Jimmy carefully printed his name. At last the fourteenth arrived, and Jimmy went off to school with eyes sparkling and a smile stretching from ear to ear. Jimmy's mother could hardly stand the tension of the waiting. Finally, the bus came and Jimmy got off. His mother, seeing his serious expression, rushed out to comfort him. When he saw her he shook his head and said, "Not one. Not a single one." "You mean you didn't get any valentines?" his mother cried. And Jimmy, with a big smile, said, "Oh, I got valentines but, Mother, I *remembered everybody* with a valentine. I didn't forget one. Not a single one."

So how do we learn to think like Jimmy? I believe there are at least three attributes we must develop if we are to build the world community.

1. The first is by developing a vision—Harriet Naylor said, “We need imaginative inspiration to dream of what could be.” It has been said, and demonstrated, that anything man can envision man can do. We are limited only by our vision or lack of it. Having a vision of the community we want to live in and not losing that vision when we are caught up in the sometimes grinding tasks of living is, I believe, the first attribute. Vision is the business of leaders, and we are leaders in our chosen field. Someone said, “Leaders are people who infuse vision into an organization, a community, or a society.”

2. Without this second attribute—positive thinking—making the vision a reality would be difficult. Only those who think positively will have the courage to take the necessary action even if it is risky. Positive thinking is faith that things are better than they appear to be and that doing the right thing for the right reason will produce good results in the long run, regardless of initial appearances. It is seeing the resources and not the deficiencies; recognizing the good in ourselves and others, and building on the good while overlooking the bad; and it is knowing that neither resources or opportunities are finite, therefore there is no reason to fight or undermine others to protect ourselves. Yes, it’s *accentuating the positive and eliminating the negative* and, yes, it’s thinking like Jimmy. Albert Szent-Gyorgi said, “Discovery consists of looking at the same thing as everyone else and thinking something different.” That is also a good definition of positive thinking.

3. This brings me to the third attribute—tolerance. I am truly concerned by the lack of tolerance in our society. We cannot have a real community without a huge dose of tolerance. Change is full of opportunity to resort to distrust, protectionism, criticism of others, fear of failure, or fear for survival. All of these fears and negative behavior create a climate ripe for intolerance. But I think we, above all others, must develop more tolerance, less fear of our differences, and more confidence in our similarities. A woman I admire greatly and whom I first heard at the 1984 AVA Conference in North Carolina, Maya Angelou, has written:

... mirror twins are different  
although their features jibe,  
and lovers think quite different thoughts  
while lying side by side.

We love and lose in China,  
we weep on England’s moors,  
and laugh and moan in Guinea,  
and thrive on Spanish shores.

We seek success in Finland,  
are born and die in Maine.  
In minor ways we differ.  
In major we’re the same.

I note the obvious differences  
between each sort and type,  
but we are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.

Please join me in repeating her refrain:

we are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.

we are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.

It becomes increasingly easier to be tolerant when we focus on our likenesses and not on our unlikenesses.

One of the advantages of being sixty years old is having been able to see all those wonderful moves of the 1940s. One that really shaped my life concept was *The Enchanted Cottage*. Robert Young was a dashing American, flying for the RAF (Royal Air Force), and Dorothy McGuire was a less-than-attractive librarian in a small English village outside London. When Robert Young was horribly burned in a plane crash, he was sent to the village to recover. He was so disfigured that many people turned away from him. But the

homely librarian befriended him and they fell in love with each other and moved into a small cottage on the edge of the village.

A miracle happened inside that small cottage. When the couple was outside they were seen as unattractive and even ugly, but inside the enchanted cottage they were extraordinarily beautiful because they were seen through the positive eyes of love. I have seen that miracle again and again in the years since, and I now truly believe that the making of a miracle is always the result of the positive power of love reflected in the thinking of man. Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder and when the beholder is love all things become beautiful. Maybe—we can create community and thrive in the kaleidoscope of change into the next millennium by developing vision, positive thinking, and tolerance, or maybe—by simply loving one another. Maybe that is all it takes for that miracle to happen.

Again, thank you for loving me enough to give me this award and for allowing me to share these thoughts with you.