

Good evening.

My name is Barb Byrum and I'm the State Representative for the 67th District, which covers the southern portion of Lansing and rural Ingham County.

Thank you for inviting me tonight to this incredible event.

I want to congratulate the scholarship recipients.

I want to thank the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan Foundation for helping so many talented women reach their goal of going to law school and pursuing their dreams.

In a sense, this is like a homecoming of sorts for me.

Four years ago, this outstanding Foundation helped me in my own career path.

Thanks to this scholarship, I went to law school.

I studied the law.

I got my law degree.

And I did what everyone should do with their law degree: I opened a small business and ran for office.

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But seriously, knowing the law has helped me tremendously as a state representative.

I did not think it would, but it truly has.

Knowing the law has instilled in me a deep appreciation for my duties as a voice for the citizens I represent.

It allows me to read our laws with a clearer mind and a sharper eye.

It helps me see how we can fix a problem, address an oversight, close a loophole and correct an injustice.

The law defines our society.

It is a great tool for change.

It is an avenue to making a difference in our community.

I am truly grateful for my years in law school and for this Foundation's role in helping me fulfill my dreams.

I just wanted to say a few words tonight about leadership and why it is so important for women to take part in our communities, to play a role and to make our voices heard.

I want to start by telling you a little story.

My mother is Dianne Byrum.

She's the first woman to lead the Democratic Caucus in the State House.

She served as leader from 2002 to 2006.

As leader of the Democrats, she broke every fundraising record on the books.

She led an aggressive, focused and disciplined group of legislators.

She helped control the debates of the day.

And she got results.

She helped pass meaningful laws that make a real difference in our lives.

Her political leadership helped Democrats win 11 seats in two election cycles – and take the majority in the House for the first time since the 1980s.

The scale of our victory has not been seen since the Second World War.

I am very proud of my mother.

I have her seat today – the first time a daughter has succeeded a mother in the state House.

I have often thought about my mother's legacy.

Maybe that legacy can best be summed up after Democrats won the majority. A friend and coworker of my mother's wrote a little note congratulating her on her historic victory.

The note read simply: "When women lead, good things happen."

And good things happen all the time when women are in position to influence decisions.

The point I hope to make is not about partisanship, but about what can happen when a smart, sharp and dedicated woman is in a leadership position.

I strongly believe that we bring diverse viewpoints to the table.

We offer perspectives that are often overlooked or underplayed.

We raise questions on health care issues, education, jobs and public safety that are unique and sometimes, sadly, overlooked.

We question the status quo because the status quo was often established without our input.

By no means am I suggesting that we have been intentionally suppressed.

What I have learned is that our concerns and needs were never fully voiced in the past.

It does not have to be that way.

That is a lesson I learned about 20 years ago.

My mother likes to say this one incident led me down the path to politics.

Personally, I doubt I was thinking that far ahead in grade school.

Here is what happened:

When I was in grade school, our principal put out a suggestion box.

I decided to make full use of this suggestion box one day.

I pointed out to the principal that only boys raised the school flag.

I said this was wrong.

I said it was unfair.

I wanted to know why girls did not get this privilege.

The principal said I brought up a good point.

The next week, I was allowed to raise the flag – the first girl in my grade school to do so.

I learned that if you speak up, you can make a change.

That lesson has been with me ever since.

I want all of you to know that you, too, can make a difference.

If you see something wrong, if you see something unfair, speak up.

Margaret Mead once said, "Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world."

They did it by speaking up, by taking action, by making a difference.

I also learned a great deal from my two grandmothers.

My two grandmothers were strong influences early in my life.

My mother's mother, Mary Dershem Everitt, single-handedly raised a family and ran a small business – a gas station –after my grandfather passed away.

My grandmother on my dad's side, Frances Byrum, was a nurse and worked tirelessly to care for countless patients in our community.

They taught me self-reliance.

They taught me the value of taking action, instead of doing nothing or just sitting on our hands and watching the world go by.

They taught me to give back to my community, which has been very good to me and my family.

This last lesson, the value of giving back, is one reason why I am active in my community.

I own a hardware store, Byrum Hardware, in Charlotte.

While making a profit is important, I also believe it is vital that I run a business that our community can be proud of.

I pay good wages.

I provide health care for my workers.

My business is a partner in many community projects.

I also mentor students in Holt.

I am on the governing board of my church, St. Augustine.

Before I was elected to serve in the House, I was president of the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce.

I was secretary of the Ingham County Brownfield Redevelopment Authority.

I was chair of the Ingham County Economic Development Corporation.

I got involved because I wanted to make a difference in my community.

In each of these positions, I wanted to use what I know about running a business to help others, to attract investments into my community and, in the process, to create jobs.

These are skills that I learned over time, but I believe I have learned the lessons well.

Now, I am using that ability to help our entire state come up with ways to attract businesses, create jobs and at the same time ensure all our citizens enjoy a good quality of life.

I want to make sure that our students across Michigan have access to outstanding schools.

I want to make sure our seniors can buy affordable prescription drugs.

I want to make sure workers who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own can get retraining and access to new jobs.

I see these hopes and goals not only as a legislator, but also as a woman, a wife, and a daughter.

I want to make sure that our sisters, mothers, daughters and friends get all the opportunities they need to succeed.

And that's why it is absolutely vital for women to play a full and active role in our communities.

Take leadership roles.

Volunteer for the school board.

Sign up for neighborhood events.

Strive for the top in your place of employment.

And run for office.

With all our day-to-day duties, these extra commitments are hard work.

It takes commitment and conviction.

It takes belief in yourself.

We must speak up because that is how we can make a difference.

And leadership gives us a strong foundation from which to speak out.

I truly appreciate the opportunity to speak with you tonight and share some of my thoughts about leadership.