

Presentation to the Upstate Institute
Board of Directors

June 19, 2008
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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, community leaders, professors, and staff members of Colgate University. It is a pleasure to speak with you all today, and an honor to come back to the Upstate Institute. I would like to thank Professor Ellen Kraly and Julie Dudrick for making it possible.

They asked me here today, to this gathering of community and academia to discuss how I got started with the Institute, where I have been since graduating Colgate, and where I hope to go from here. While I am sure that Ellen's generous offer to have me speak with you today did have something to do with my overzealous enthusiasm over one of my developing plans, I am not naïve to the fact that my lasting, continued experience and connection with the Institute and its area of focus also serves as an accolade for the Institute itself. But make no mistake, no matter what I have or can give back to this organization, I am, and will always be, in debt to it for leading me down the path I am currently on.

The Upstate Institute is an incredibly worthy and invaluable organization, and one that is obviously near and dear to my heart. I started my relationship with the Institute back in 2003 when Professor Jill Tiefenthaler brought me onboard as a Fellow to help Chenango County's United Way put together a Needs-Based Assessment. In the process that followed, I got to learn two things pretty well: the geographical layout of Chenango County and that United Way seemingly had the burden of the entire world on its shoulders.

I met with dozens of policy-makers, stakeholders, and fund recipients over the course of that summer, all telling me of the programs they were running, and the progress they could see, or would soon see, or would be able to see with just a little more time, with just a little more funding, or with just a little more man-power. With just a steady source of revenue each of them knew that they could lift their part of Chenango County up just a little higher: feeding more of the hungry, providing more heat to the cold, giving access to transportation for those without cars, and giving hope to those who had most simply given up.

Before coming back here today, I was able to track down the notebook I kept that summer. I pulled through its pages. And my first impression was amazement – how could my handwriting possibly be this bad?

My first impression relevant to our conversation here today was, however, a little different. Past those pages of my shorthand, past the analysis of the data, past the notes from the stacks of program and County guides, and past the pages of highlighted, underlined, and circled “words of advice” from Jill, I reached my remarks on the crux of the project – taking what I had learned and making a recommendation to United Way as to where their funding priorities, for that year, should lie. In the margin of that notebook, in deep black, capitalized letters, I scribbled one word with two question marks: “HOW??”

How do we prioritize where our funds should and should not go year-in and year-out? How can we possibly decide whether it’s a more worthy cause to fund an organization that provides day-care for those who can’t afford it over one that provides subsidized insulation for homes so people don’t freeze during our winter nights? How do we balance investing in short-term payoffs over longer-term ones when there are mouths to feed and people who need shelter today? How do we decide whether it is more worth it to make one life better over another?

The answer isn’t pleasant, and certainly isn’t right. And it is, without sugar or sweetener: We just do.

It was this answer, among the many moments of inspiration I found at the Institute, through VITA, and at Colgate in general, that kept me here. Well, at least kept my heart here after I graduated.

I went down to DC to get my first graduate degree in Public Policy at Georgetown, specializing in Rural Economic Development. My thesis was on the effectiveness, or general lack thereof of New York State’s Empire Zone program. I worked on the Hill for Senator Clinton during my tenure, tackling a number of Upstate projects, exploring new initiatives, and learning about the other side of the decision-making process. And after finishing my studies early, I took a job with BearingPoint, a consulting firm, to help their clients at USDA and HUD provide broadband and public housing in the most efficient and effective ways possible to our rural citizens across the country.

While in DC, I got to witness minds collide over distribution decisions on an even grand scale. I watched as millions, if not billions of dollars were sent to all corners of the country, all countries of the world: for foreign aid, for entitlements, for war, for peace, for local earmarks, for paying our country’s bloated debt. But watching every bill pass, I remembered what I learned here, in this place: to question what I saw and ask if we can possibly do better.

We may have to make those decisions at the end of the day as to who gets to eat and who gets their medication. We may just have to swallow it. But we have to remember that we have a responsibility to ourselves, to each other, that we better make sure we are doing everything we *can* to place ourselves in a position where we have to make as few of those gut-wrenching, life-sustaining decisions as possible.

Decisions that allow the hungry to get food, the aged to care, the homeless to get shelter – these decisions should never be the afterthoughts of politicians, the bargained for program, the log-rolled scrap we are left to, here, in Madison County, in Chenango County, in Herkimer and Oneida, that we are left to “work with,” “deal with,” “make the best out of.” These decisions are moral imperatives, and I think too often those furthest away forget what it’s like in the homes of America. Thus, DC did not hold me for long.

In a last minute decision in August, I decided to take a scholarship offer from Cornell University. I returned, and there’s still not a day I don’t cross that border into Upstate along 81 that I don’t break out in a smile. I returned because I knew what I wanted to, and needed to do.

We may have to set priorities in Upstate New York – the local politicians, the policy-makers, the community leaders, the Boards and the Councils, the business leaders, the philanthropists, and the civic activists – all of us, we may have to set priorities because, as it has been granted, we only have so much to go around. But I knew coming back that I wanted to at least be a part of this crew, here, in the boat with you, making sure that we’re just not stuck bailing out our truly beautiful ship, but we’re making headway in getting our ship to shore. For too long have we been just floating. For too long has our region been the victim of half-hearted federal and State efforts for revitalization and reinvestment; the recipient of empty promises...and all in the face of the tremendous, tireless and heartfelt efforts put forth by so many of you in this room.

....And it all started here at the Upstate Institute...

And thus we come to the final reason of why I’m here today: to very briefly discuss one of the initiatives I hope to be organizing going forward in Upstate New York. It is my firm belief that development – smart, sustainable economic development – is key for our future. What I will lay out for you now is just one way, a novel way, I do purport, to make this happen; and one I truly believe could make a difference.

I am not here to ask you for money... yet. But going forward, today, tomorrow, in the months ahead, I would love to have your support. Your voices, your questions,

your suggestions, your time, when the moment is right, to help to make this and initiatives like it get off the ground.

Over the next six months I will be going through the preliminary phases of setting up a non-profit, tentatively named the Upstate Foundation, as to be established with the mission of providing assistance to Upstate businesses in attracting and retaining graduating students in Upstate New York.

The students that come into our region every single year are one of our most valuable untapped resources. Sorry to the ethanol fans. They represent the fresh blood that gets pumped through our country – from households across America, to colleges (with a bit of luck), and then usually to the most demanding job markets. Unfortunately, those markets don't usually include any city in Upstate. But this, interestingly enough, in a great number of Upstate locations, I have found is not due to the fact that there are no jobs to be had. Rather, it is because there is a multi-fractured disconnect between the supply of graduating skilled labor and those demanding it. For the economists in the room, in certain instances, there are demonstrable market failures, or perversions.

The Upstate Foundation will attempt to reconcile at least some of these issues. It will do so through, *most* briefly, through three initiatives.

The first is through connecting Upstate businesses and Upstate universities. Such as through an online job database specifically designed for the region. And through strengthening (or establishing) bonds between human resource departments and Career service centers. Improving the flow of information to ensure that our region is at least considered to be a viable job market.

The second initiative will aim to connect Upstate business and Upstate graduating students. This is where things usually get a little more... interesting.

The Foundation will offer at least 100 annual \$1,000 Fellowships to top students who are offered and then accept positions in Upstate New York – free and clear. The Foundation will then host these individuals for a weekend at a given location, allowing them to make connections between each other, with invited program alumni, and with local college alumni organization and other young professional organization representatives from each of the target cities present. They will then, ideally, be recognized by a State representative for being part of the future of Upstate, and given a certificate or award, with the hope that these 100 who would not ordinarily be here will stay for a bit. No matter what though, the remainder of these 100 will provide the beginning for a larger base of young, connected professionals for the following year's recipients to network with and befriend. A regional approach to attracting talent and building sustainable communities.

And finally, again, in all too brief detail, the third initiative of the Foundation will be to assist in coordinating policy initiatives that target young professionals in the Upstate region. All too often I have seen people working for the same goal using two different, sometimes counterproductive means to get there. Coordination and collaboration, to borrow a phrase from Ellen, is essential to reducing waste and increasing the odds of reaching our goals.

And boy, we need to better our odds every chance we get.

Before I sit down, realizing I've probably run well over my allotted amount of time, I want to quickly share with you a quote from that Needs Based Assessment Jill and I put together back in 2003.

I actually remember taking down this particular one. It was a really hot and muggy July afternoon. Betty Osborne, Head of Chenango County's Department of Social Services, was kind enough to see me, and somewhere in our conversation, she looked at me and said that her son had told her something the other day that might give me a little perspective as I did my work. You will have to accept one of two things "if you want to live in Chenango County," so he said, "1. You will never make a lot of money and you'll just have to accept that; or 2. You will have to leave, make it somewhere else, and maybe come back." But too often, too often they just don't.

Upstate New York faces challenges, serious challenges that we all know are only going to grow even more difficult to face as the price to live in and heat rural America continues to rise. It is thanks to people like you – whether it's through the research you do, providing perspective and solutions to the world; the programs you run; or the organizations you lead – you are the ones keeping this boat afloat and you do it because you know our region is worth fighting for. Our citizens are worth fighting for. Our kids and the futures we want them to have - here. That is worth fighting for. These are decisions are unwilling to compromise on.

And I guess what I came to say to you all today, is that I'm here to lend a hand.

Thank you all.