

Good Morning. I am as disappointed as you are that Governor Janet Napolitano is not here to greet you this morning. Arizona not only has a female governor, women hold many of the other top positions, including Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. And a number of the tribal governments in Arizona are led by women. Isn't it wonderful to be in a state where women are running things, or I should say where women hold formal leadership positions. Women actually run things everywhere.

Thank you for allowing me to participate in this conference. It is wonderful to see so many people gathered together to share stories, ideas and strategies about how to reduce poverty and injustice in our country and across the globe. Some time ago, Bob Friedman, CFED founder, said, "One person can change the world, but 500 of us have a better chance." The more than a thousand people registered at this conference, and many thousands more working on assets projects around the world are an affirmation that one person can change the world.

Many of the people at this conference not only work directly on building assets for low income individuals and communities, they also work to create a political and social climate that is conducive to asset building. This conference increases the visibility of the field of asset development and moves us closer to a time when there is universal acceptance of the simple fact that serious poverty reduction strategies must include the development of assets for individuals and communities.

Before I make some remarks about the assets movement, I want to spend a few minutes sharing some very basic background information about tribal governments so you can put the asset work in tribal communities, as well as my remarks today, in some kind of historical and cultural context.

There are over 550 very distinct tribal governments in the United States, each with their own unique history, culture and language. Tribal governments have a very long history of governance. Governments such as the Hopi here in Arizona, and the Umatilla in Oregon, have lived on the same land for more than 10,000 years. Other tribal governments, such as the Cherokee and Choctaw, have been forcibly removed from their homelands and have almost had to reinvent their communities and nations in unfamiliar territory. Yes,

despite a history of extreme adversity, our tribal governments remain strong and continue to maintain a government to government relationship with the United States government.

When the United States was in its infancy it recognized tribal sovereignty in formal treaties with tribal nations. These treaty agreements often involved the United States government taking tribal land. According to the First Nations Development Institute, by the early twentieth century, the U.S. took more than 2 billion acres by treaty or official government confiscation. Though land was and is critical to the cultural survival of tribal people and their governments, tribal governments now hold only a tiny fraction of their original land holdings. The land base and population of tribal governments range from those with millions of acres to some with less than 25 acres of land.

The history, contemporary lives and future of Native America is intertwined with that of surrounding communities. Tribal governments and organizations do not conduct their lives and work in a vacuum. There are hundreds of partnerships, cooperative agreements and coalitions between tribal communities and governmental and non-governmental organizations. When tribal governments build roads, water systems, develop business enterprises or provide an array of family services, it benefits everyone in the community, not just tribal members.

For most of the past four decades I have been privileged to work and live in both urban and rural low-income communities. These communities, from San Francisco's Hunter's Point housing project to rural communities in the Cherokee Nation, are littered with failed programs that were developed in a vacuum by governmental agencies to treat what they perceived to be the symptoms of poverty but did not even attempt to address the underlying systemic causes.

The assets movement takes a long view and a new approach. It builds on the strengths of individuals and communities and enables them to be productive participants in economic and social life of their community. Many projects require the development of

a number of partnerships of mutual respect between individuals, communities and institutions.

The relationships developed and the learning processes undertaken during the course of most assets programs enable participants to acquire an asset – a savings account, a business, a home, a college education or even a working automobile – and simultaneously encourage people to trust their own thinking, to believe in themselves and their ability to change the circumstances in which they find themselves. Asset projects create situations and circumstances that encourage individual improvement and success.

Acquiring a sense of self efficacy is no small feat for low-income people of color, many of whom have endured the most outrageous oppression and exploitation for generations. Without assets, any short-term crisis or social disruption creates havoc in the lives of low-income people. We saw the most horrific example of that very situation on a large scale in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast over the course of the past year.

It is not surprising that people of color in low-income communities sometimes have to be encouraged to believe in their own ability to create fundamental change. They are often socially isolated, without assets, and in the case of Native Americans have been repeatedly told their culture is archaic and irrelevant, their religion is paganistic, and their economic deprivation is entirely their own fault.

Self-efficacy is an asset that is just as important as a savings account or a house. A great deal of research indicates that people who believe in themselves and their capabilities tend to perform better in every aspect of their lives. And early research on individual development account participants supports the notion that people who acquire assets view themselves and their communities very differently than they did before they acquired assets. Once they have assets and a sense of self-efficacy, they are much more willing to view obstacles and barriers as challenges to be mastered instead of reasons to give up.

It is important for those of us who work in the movement to continue to develop partnership with communities from diverse cultures and to learn as much as possible about the history and contemporary lives of people with different values and practices.

Many people outside indigenous communities only see the deficits and problems but do not realize that we also have many important assets.

Besides land, water and other natural resources, tribal governments and their citizens also have many important cultural assets, including ancient tribal languages, medicinal practices and hundreds of seasonal ceremonies they have had since the beginning of time. Tribal traditional knowledge and stories give indigenous people a sense of continuity and knowing their place in the world. Though there is a great deal of cultural, economic and social stratification among tribal people, in almost every community, no matter how troubled, there is a core group of tradition-oriented people who still maintain traditional culture and values and pass it on to the next generation. One of our most important cultural assets is a set of values that places a very high premium on reciprocity and interdependence, with each other and with the land. Because our lives play themselves out within the framework of a tribal society, we still have a very strong sense of responsibility for one another.

Over two decades ago, my husband and I began working with rural low-income communities to rural water systems and housing. We didn't use the language of asset development to describe our work but it was and remains part of the overall movement. We developed partnerships whereby community volunteers, many of whom lived in dilapidated housing with no indoor plumbing, worked as volunteers to build their own water systems and houses. We trusted the people and tapped into their sense of responsibility for one another and they rose to the occasion. I believe these self-help projects can be replicated in other ethnic minority communities as well.

During my 12 year tenure on the Board of the Ford foundation, I had the privilege of working with Melvin Oliver and Frank de Gioviani, two visionary leaders of the assets movement. A delegation from the foundation visited asset projects in post apartheid South Africa where we listened and learned once again that many of us come to this work with a very different world view.

While touring a conservation area by boat, I was seated by an elderly man who was involved in local asset projects. On several occasions a young woman passed by with a serving tray and offered us some snacks which he initially refused. He finally took a snack and then leaned over to me and said "I never thought I would live to see the day when I would be served by a white woman, or travel as a passenger on the same boat." While we were all sharing the same informational tour, his view of the situation was quite different from the other passengers who had not suffered from virulent racism and the threat of imprisonment for even appearing in public with a white woman.

Apartheid left in its wake an incredible set of problems, including illiteracy among almost thirty percent of the population who were denied a basic education. Learning to become literate was an important asset in post-apartheid South Africa.

Each region and community has developed projects that build on their existing assets whether it is in Mexico, the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Kenya, or South America. The women in an indigenous community along the Rio Negro in Brazil, developed a weaving cooperative that allows them to use their traditional knowledge of the forest, and local materials to develop very high quality products for sale. As their cooperatively owned business has grown and they have developed assets, they view themselves differently. Once reluctant to speak of their indigenous heritage for fear of reprisals, each of the women who spoke to our group began her remarks by saying, "I am an indigenous woman."

In the Hunan Province in China, an ethnic minority community developed a written and oral female language to communicate with one another about oppressive conditions and inequity in their lives. Women in this community have passed the language from generation to generation for hundreds of years. By the later part of the 20th century, the women's language was no longer routinely used and the community was faced with the prospect of losing one of its most precious cultural attributes. With assistance from the Ford Foundation assets program, they constructed a museum and visitor's center and curated an exhibit of artifacts related to women's language. They also developed proprietary products to sell to the public and most importantly, they started a series of classes to teach the language to a new

generation of women. Outside recognition of the genius of the community of women who created and preserved the language fundamentally changed the dynamics and economy of that community.

Much of the global asset work has been done within the cultural context of the local community.

While we often concern ourselves with how many challenges we still face in this movement, we also have much to celebrate as we see the assets concept taking hold in many different places from the Blackfoot Reservation in Montana, to Cairo, Egypt and Beijing, China. Individual development accounts, in particular, have already benefited low-income people in many communities, including my own Cherokee Nation, and promise to benefit millions more over time. A few years ago, I visited an IDA demonstration project in Tulsa near my home. I sat through an afternoon of meetings and discussion but what I remember most about that day is a young single mother who lived in a small apartment and worked as a clerk at Wal-Mart. The IDA program allowed her to save enough money to make a down payment on a modest home, something she never dreamed possible. She told us that one of her greatest pleasures was watching her son play in the small yard of their new home. She said that owning her own home had changed everything. She now thinks about and plans more for the future.

There have also been changes in the financial services community. There are now a number of locally governed community development financial institutions that provide financial services to help low-income people accrue assets. And, community organizations are working with banks and other financial services institutions to develop financial products and services as an alternative to predatory lenders in low-income communities. These small pay day loan and check cashing businesses scattered throughout low-income communities may appear to be Mom and Pop shops but they are part of a billion dollar predatory lending business.

And there are many new initiatives being developed to build on the success of individual development accounts. I am especially excited by about the

SEED Initiative, a 10-year initiative to strengthen savings programs for children and youth. Again, Frank deGiovani has been a relentless advocate and supporter of this project.

And there are other exciting projects – the Children's Savings Program in the United Kingdom, the Canadian Government's Learning Bond, which provides up to \$2,000 for children born after 003, and of course, the Ow4eesta Fund's excellent youth financial education program.

Working in the field of poverty reduction and assets requires a wide array of partners and strategies. We need people from the academic community to conduct research and organizations like the Corporation for Enterprise Development to demonstrate the effectiveness of projects on the ground. We need people from the business sector to understand that developing assets for individuals and communities can be rewarding and profitable; we need practitioners; and people like yourselves who are using their intellect and imagination to figure out new ways to improve lives in low-income communities, and we need activists who are willing to organizing against injustice. Without organizing and the work of activists, the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977 would not have been passed.

Until Gail Small and Native Action took off-reservation banks to court they could not receive banking services or even an ATM machine on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. And Blackpipe State Bank in South Dakota only ended its practice of refusing to make loans on properties located on reservations when the Department of Justice filed a lawsuit against them in 1994. Obvious, this was well before our current attorney general, when we actually had a department of justice that worked against injustice.

The asset work is conducted within the framework of a very complex set of laws, relationships and social networks. Therefore it is important to continue for all of us to continue to establish networks that use research, public policy, advocacy, the media and work on the ground in projects to

advance and work and, hopefully, over time, we can realize Bob Friedman's dream of changing the world.

Thank you.