

**Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords
Greater Tucson Leadership Graduation
Adult Leadership Program
May 30, 2007**

It is with great pleasure that I stand before you tonight to celebrate your graduation from the Greater Tucson Leadership Adult Leadership Program. Many of my friends are fellow graduates, and what I have always admired most about the program is the *call to action* that underlies the curriculum.

Each one of you was selected for this program because of your leadership skills and because you hold leadership positions in our community. Throughout the past five months, the Greater Tucson Leadership curriculum has provided an immersion into the major issues of our region. Issues like health care, arts and culture, education, criminal justice and economic development. But your lessons did not stop there. You sit here tonight, with your knowledge base well-burnished by the hours you have dedicated to the Leadership Program. But you also have achieved something much greater – you graduate tonight with a shared commitment to action, to collaboration, to working with your neighbors to improve the lives of all of our residents.

Your graduation comes at a critical juncture for Tucson and Southern Arizona. In fact, your timing is impeccable! At more than any other time in Tucson's rich history, a centrifugal force has gripped our land. The force is pulling people together, sitting them down in rooms, demanding collaboration, forging a shared vision.

This force was at the heart of the Tucson Regional Town Hall that took place earlier this month. It can be credited with the passage of the Regional Transportation Authority. And, I must say that the 33 of you are an important part of this force for change in our Sonoran Desert.

Let's be very clear that collaborative action has not been the hallmark of our region for very long. In fact, a stubborn, Wild West independence is much more reflective of our Southern Arizona DNA. And it is a DNA that has been brewing for thousands of years.

Ours is a land that has seen an ongoing tug-of-war for just who we are and who claims us. Tucson's first inhabitants roamed the land hunting mammoth and bison between 12,500 and 6,000 B.C. They made way for the Cochise with their stone tools, and then the Hohokam who began farming here in 300 A.D.

Spanish missionaries arrived in 1692, and by 1804, Tucson was an adobe village of about 1000 Spanish, Mexican and Native American residents. Next came the trappers and traders, adding their two cents to what it meant to be a Tucsonan, followed by many who stopped in on their way to California searching for gold, and came back to stay.

I don't think "collaboration" was a word that had been invented back then. When a person did not feel like he had been adequately collaborated with, a bullet solved things just fine. Gun battles for turf ruled the day. Focus groups and white papers had not yet made the scene. When the U.S. negotiated the Gadsden Purchase with Mexico in 1854, making Arizona a U.S. territory, at least a few congressmen at the time suggested the nation pay Mexico double the sale price to take Arizona back!

Throughout history, five different flags have claimed this land – Spain, Mexico, the United States, the Confederacy and the Union. I can guess that whatever flag was flapping in our clear blue skies, the people went about their own business, their "don't fence me in attitude," their strong stripes of independent thinking, safely in place.

John Wayne once said, "Courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway." When you study the major issues we are dealing with today, "scared to death" is a response that is NOT totally off base. Our health care system is broken, Arizona schools consistently rate near the bottom of national surveys, our water supplies might not keep up with our enormous rate of growth, and crime, immigration and the preservation of our natural environment all taunt us, begging for solutions.

I applaud every one of you in this room for "saddling up anyway." I decided to enter public service because I looked around and knew I did not just want to complain about problems, I wanted to work toward solutions. This same belief is what brings all of you here tonight.

You did not spend your evenings watching *Gray's Anatomy*, you dedicated an entire day at Carondelet learning about health care issues. You did not spend your weekends reading trashy novels, you sat in a classroom at the University of Arizona to better understand our region's education challenges. And, instead of watching one more rerun of *Law and Order*, you spent 9 ½ hours at Pima County Superior Court absorbing details about criminal justice in our region.

As graduates of Greater Tucson Leadership, you are charged with transforming all you have learned into actions and solutions, working collaboratively across the region. But collaboration, which is absolutely critical to the growth and prosperity of Southern Arizona, is still not easy to come by. That historic DNA I talked about still churns in our collective bloodstreams.

The *Arizona Daily Star* on May 18 wrote an editorial at the conclusion of the Tucson Regional Town Hall, which noted that, "Cooperation and collaboration will be the keys to the success" of the Town Hall report. The editorial also included a big "however."

The editorial stated: "Tucson has historically divided itself into fiefdoms. Politicians, developers, bureaucrats, nonprofits and neighborhood and special interest groups locked themselves in silos...Each has a hierarchy and a sphere of influence. Regardless of how sincere and well-intended the cause, protecting single or special interests can be detrimental to the common good."

I share this quote not to be negative, but to remind us all that challenges exist, trenches will be built, special interests will be closely guarded. But I remain optimistic. If we are aware of the challenges, if we face them openly and honestly, we can find solutions.

We need to work across the aisle, and to break down any silos of special interest. These needs are dramatically evident in Washington, D.C. I deal with this every day, *and* I strongly believe that one of the best weapons against silos is to *listen*. True leadership demands actively listening to others' concerns, to making sure that people feel heard, and then working together to find common ground, solutions that benefit the greater good.

William Butler Yeats, in *The Second Coming*, eloquently captures how vital the common good is to our world. He warns that "if the center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." He lyrically captures the essential nature of the wide swath of people and beliefs at the center, far from the extremes on either end of the spectrum: *The middle ground, most often, is the land of the greatest good, the heart of balance, the center of compassion for the lives of the many.*

The "the lives of the many" are who you committed yourself to when you embarked upon this program. I applaud you for your dedication, your hunger to learn, in great detail, about the critical issues faced by our region *and* to your commitment to use this knowledge and your leadership skills to transform our region. Working together, with compassion for all, our region can thrive.