

# SPEECH

*Transcript*

**Speaker:**

Anne Caprara – Former Chief of Staff for Betsy Markey,  
Current Chief of Staff for Governor JB Pritzker

**Building Blue in Larimer: The Longshot Years**

***How Courage, Kindness & Resilience Changed a County***

Well, I want to thank Tim and the Larimer County Democratic Party for the kind invitation to join you here tonight. I didn't need these glasses when I was working for Betsy.

I must admit this feels incredibly strange. As both Betsy and JB can tell you, I write speeches. I don't give them. I have been a staffer for 25 years now. And usually at events like this, I lurk at a table in the back of the room, checking my phone and complaining about the food.

So, let me begin by recognizing all the staffers here tonight who are currently trying to sink into their chairs or fade into the wallpaper and ask that you all take a moment to recognize them, too. It turns out you don't need an elected title in front of your name to make public service your life's work.

Tim asked me to share the story of my career's unique connection to Larimer County in the hopes that it would encourage all of you to stay involved and not give in to the cynicism of the moment. Which is funny because I am a 46-year-old single, constantly aggravated political operative who lives alone with a tiny bird and mostly spends my Friday nights screaming at CNN.

But I agreed to do this for two reasons, and you'll have to indulge me tonight. First, I spent one of the happiest years of my life living and working in Fort Collins. And second, I owe Betsy Markey a debt that I will never repay.

So, please indulge me in this love letter to my former home and boss.

I moved to Fort Collins in January of 2008. Betsy was running in what was then Colorado's 4th Congressional District, a solidly Republican seat, which included Weld County and all 24 counties of the Eastern Plains. Congressman Negus, be grateful for redistricting.

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Betsy interviewed me over the phone for the job of campaign manager after her first choice turned her down, something I never let her forget. She was taking on Marilyn Musgrave who started her political career by, you all know her, uh by blacking out the sex ed sections of textbooks in the Fort Morgan school district and ended her career voting against the Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes bill.

Democrats had been trying to beat Musgrave for three election cycles with no luck. Back then, Larimer County was considered purplish-red and the Democrats here were doing the lord's work, just recruiting a candidate to run. When I moved to Fort Collins, I knew no one. I had never even been in Colorado before.

I was in my 20s and I had only ever lived on the East Coast. I am a Philadelphian by birth, by sports allegiances, and by nature. We are a tough, resilient, gritty group of people who will fight like hell for the folks we care about, but would rather jump into a river and drown than speak to a stranger.

So, I'd like you to imagine my culture shock when the day after moving into my little rental house on Oak Street, there was a knock on my door. I thought it was a home invasion, but it turned out to be local Democratic Party volunteer Mark Hansen welcoming me to the neighborhood.

The next day, I went to the grocery store and as I was yanking some Cheerios off a shelf, a random woman stopped to say hello. I literally looked at her and said, "Are you speaking to me?" I thought I had moved to Mars.

But little by little, this place seeped into my bones. Betsy had a large and committed group of volunteers on that 2008 campaign. In addition to all the door knocking and phone calling, they organized potlucks for the staff and shifts to manage the front desk. Nancy Bryant would have us all over to dinner at her house. And Cheri Nichols was constantly registering a deep concern for how much sleep everyone was getting. Bill Russell would find us office space and fix anything that needed fixing. Tim and Linda Sherrod would help write position papers and find housing for field staffers.

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Betsy's campaign was a community and in a very short period of time it became my community. I was at that stage of life where you feel like a kid pretending to be an adult and you are waiting for the world to reveal what it expects out of you. Fort Collins expected me to be a neighbor, to show up for people, to care about their lives, to say hello, to help a stranger drunk driving their bike home from the Rio at night.

Of course, at the center of it all was Betsy and Jim. If you know Betsy Markey, then you know that the woman is an annoying, wonderful ray of constant sunshine. Betsy's idea of the best day ever is walking in the longest parade she can find, shaking the most number of hands she can grab. My idea of the best day ever is sitting quietly in my living room, speaking to no one, contemplating the people who have annoyed me that week.

You can imagine the hilarity of the two of us working together every day. She had a relentless work ethic. I could send her anywhere to meet with anyone, preferably at 5 in the morning when she is at her most insufferably cheerful.

I think the happiest day Betsy ever spent on the campaign trail was when we had her work a morning shift at a local diner as the coffee pourer, a job which allowed her to talk to everyone in the restaurant. I remember she left after her shift and looked at me and said, "Wasn't that just the best?"

She is constitutionally incapable of holding a grudge, something which I was bred for. In my many years working for Betsy, I can only remember her getting angry with me once. It was over yard signs, which, like every candidate in the history of the republic, she felt we did not have enough of.

More importantly, during a time in my life when I felt impossibly lost, Betsy and Jim welcomed me into their home and their family. During the 14 months of that first congressional race, they along with this wonderful Fort Collins community, taught this curmudgeonly Philadelphian how to prioritize kindness in your politics and in your life. And when Betsy was elected in 2008, walking into Congress, representing a district that leaned Republican by almost six percentage points, she taught me how to be brave.

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Winning that first race in 2008 was hard. Trying to hold on to that seat in 2010 was even harder. We knew from the very first week in office that we were at the top of the target list for Republicans in President Obama's first midterm election.

I was young and I was focused on winning at the expense of almost everything else. I did everything I could to encourage Betsy to curb her natural progressive instincts to try and court right-leaning voters for reelection.

The most consequential vote before us was for the ultimate passage of the Affordable Care Act, Obamacare. The leadup to that vote was traumatic to say the least. During the summer of 2009, Betsy did 10 town halls on healthcare. Each one was packed to the gills with Tea Party activists screaming about death panels and Medicare cuts. We had to hire off duty police officers to help control the crowds. I remember one town hall in Longmont that turned so vitriolic that Betsy, who could remain positive through a funeral if she needed to, walked out at the end, got in her car, and burst into tears.

The first time we had to take a vote on Obamacare passage, our staff had to lock the door of our congressional office in DC because it had become flooded with activists screaming at legislators. And when we locked that door, those same activists started slipping knives underneath it.

I knew that if Betsy Markey voted to pass the ACA, she was going to lose re-election. I remember so clearly sitting in Betsy's office in the Longworth building the week before the final healthcare vote, laying out the polling and the political circumstances and recommending to her in the strongest possible terms that she vote no on the healthcare vote. I also remember Betsy listening to it all and then leaning across the table, grabbing my hand and saying very clearly, "Anne, I don't care if I lose. Some things are worth losing over. I'm voting Yes on this bill."

In November of 2010, Betsy lost her seat in Congress. She was one of five deciding votes to pass the ACA in the House. The Republicans didn't let anyone forget it. But if you or someone you love has health care coverage because of that bill, you have Betsy Markey to thank for it.

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I have Betsy Markey to thank for something invaluable.

I had no way of knowing 16 years ago just how many times during my career I would face a decision or be asked to advise on one that pitted what was politically expedient against what was morally right.

I wanted to stand here tonight on the eve of Betsy's 70th birthday. In front of her family and friends to say that anytime I've gotten it right was because I had Betsy's model of courage to guide me.

Tim asked me to share what my time living and working in Larimer County politics meant to my career. I'm here to tell you that it meant everything to my career.

I know if you are sitting in this room tonight, you are struggling. As Democrats, activists, volunteers, staffers, elected officials, as Americans, I know that every day is an effort to figure out the exact amount of existential dread you can live with that will push rather than paralyze you.

My career started in this picturesque town on a longshot bid for Congress in a year where our politics for one brief moment was filled with an uncommon amount of hope. And in the last decade and a half, I've had to contend with the fact that that hope was so fleeting and that the work I have devoted my life to has such an enormous capacity to break my heart. I won't lie to you. The politics of a great democracy will grind you down. It will challenge your faith in your country and your fellow human. It will belittle your most dearly held beliefs. And in the end, it will leave you with a stark choice. Bow under its unending pressure and give up. Or allow the scars where the broken parts have healed to become the armor you wear into your next battle.

Betsy should have served 10 years in Congress. She is exactly the type of person Americans say they want to elect. Kind and brave and honest. The forces that defeated her in 2010 were the canaries in the coal mine of what we face in 2026.

Those forces shaped people like Donald Trump and all the sycophants who surround him. But they also shaped staffers like me. Watching some of the absolute worst people in our country



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take out one of our best made me realize that the most important thing I could do with my cantankerous Philadelphia grit is use it to fight for people whose kindness the other side sees as weakness. I am not saying that I have spent the last 16 years working to avenge Betsy's 2010 loss. I'm just saying that Italian Irish Philadelphians have really, really long memories.

Lucky for me, my career has been bookended by working for two people who embody the qualities I believe we most need in our politics right now. Courage and kindness. JB Pritsker is going to get his own introduction tonight, and no one is going to take one done by his Chief of Staff seriously.

I will say I've spent the last eight years telling him he's been my second favorite elected official to work for. But the truth is, I knew almost immediately after meeting him that I was going to accept any job he offered me because he reminded me so much of Betsy. JB also loves parades and people and yes, yard signs. And he also inspires fierce loyalty because like Betsy, there is a kindness about him that is rare in this very ruthless business.

But rather than wax on, maybe the best thing I can do is end on a story that proves my point.

There are two items that hang on my wall that I treasure above everything else in my collection of personal and political memorabilia. One is a gift from Betsy and one is a gift from JB.

When I turned 30, Betsy took a print of Rosie the Riveter to the House floor and had every female member of Congress sign it. Nancy Pelosi's signature is right in the middle under Rosie's flexed bicep.

A few years ago, when JB was elected to his second term as governor, I returned to my hotel room on election night to a large piece of art sitting on my bed. It was a photo mosaic of Ruth Bader Ginsburg done by a well-known artist made up of pictures of famous women from history. But when I looked closely, I realized he had had one picture tile changed. There in the middle was a photo of my mom, a woman I lost to a car accident when I was 12, who never got to see my career as an adult.



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Betsy's gift reminds me of all the incredible women who have inspired me in this career. JB's gift reminds me of the one woman who has inspired me my whole life. Taken together, they remind me that kind, courageous public servants have not left our politics. They just need us all to fight for them.

People like me don't often speak at dinners like this. But maybe it's worth hearing us out occasionally because somewhere in the last few years, we have lost our connection to the humanity of our elected representatives. Staffers like me, we see the worst of our politics, but we also see the best. And I will tell you, the despair that the worst instills is no match for the hope that the best inspires.

I found the best here in Fort Collins, and it kept me going through an unbelievably dark night. I hope that by sharing it with you, it will keep you going, too. It was an incredible honor and privilege to once call this place home. Thank you so much for having me back.