

VBSR Terry Ehrich Lifetime Achievement Award Speech

10.2.25

Acceptance Speech By Ellen Kahler

Thank you VERY much for this incredible honor. I feel extremely humbled by this recognition. And as I told Chelsea ... I feel this award may be a bit pre-mature. I still have so much I want to accomplish for the benefit of Vermont in the time I have left - in this lifetime.

In thinking about what I might share with all of you tonight, I thought I might tell you a story. A story of interconnection, of legacy, of networks, and of WE.

We're not so good at remembering our history here in the U.S. ... where we came from and what were the circumstances at different periods of time. And I've noticed that right now, in this very challenging time in our country, we can fall into the mental trap of thinking we are at the end of time. But in truth, we are ALWAYS in the middle of time. Time is beginningless and endless. And so we can always choose how we want to contribute in THIS moment – so that we don't make the same mistakes as in the past, and we do our best to make things a little better for our shared future.

Please indulge me as I take a brief trip down memory lane and try to weave this into an offering of appreciation and interconnection, and the value of doing good work over time.

There are so many VBSR connections that are intertwined throughout my career, really from its very start. Glenn McRae, VBSR's first executive director, for instance, was an early mentor of mine when I was at the Peace & Justice Center in the 1990s.

As many of you know, I have a particular passion for the idea that if you are working full-time, you should earn enough to be able to afford the basic necessities of life without public assistance – what we call a livable wage. Starting in 1996, in partnership with Doug Hoffer, then a self-described data analyst and now the Vermont Auditor of Accounts, we focused on producing several phases of the Vermont Job Gap Study. You may recall that these reports were about defining what are basic needs for different family sizes in Vermont and what it costs to live here. This was seminal work that led to many increases in the minimum wage over time, and an awareness of the existence of benefit cliffs.

I remember meeting Pat Heffernan from Marketing Partners around that time. She helped us get the Study circulated in the media. Then, around 1998 or 1999, she and Jane Campbell – the ED of VBSR at the time – cooked up a great idea: to create a Livable Jobs Toolkit. It would offer worksheets and tools for employers to explore how they could become livable income employers. The Toolkit was published in 2000, distributed widely throughout the business community, and supported by several workshops to help business owners use it. The funding for this Toolkit came from the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund – which had only recently been created via an act of the Legislature in 1995.

In fact, VSJF was created because of many of you in this room – folks like Kevin Harper, Allison Hooper (who co-founded Vermont Creamery), Pat Heffernan – and those no longer with us, like Terry Ehrich, Will Rapp and Bruce Seifer – who were instrumental in convincing the Legislature and Governor Howard Dean that sustainable development in Vermont needed greater focus and a dedicated organization to advance it. At that time, as many of you will recall, the concept of a triple bottom line and sustainable development was considered radical. While it's mainstream now, it was not back then! The birth of VSJF, and modest general fund support in the early years, allowed us to make small grants to innovative projects that advanced sustainable economic development in farming and food, forest products, renewable energy, green technology, and waste management. We provided early funding to start the Vermont Cheese Council, the Vermont Green Building Network, the Vermont Biofuels Initiative, and demonstration projects that led to local wood being used in various building projects in the state.

It was also around this same time when I met Lisa Lorimer – then President of Vermont Bread Company in Brattleboro, and Kevin Harper, then CEO of Autumn Harp – that I was introduced to the idea of Advisory Boards as a way to improve business performance by having experienced advisors who would serve as “outside eyes.” As a CEO, having a small group of trusted advisors to offer counsel – and at times kick you in the butt when you've got blinders on – can be impactful.

Fast forward a couple of years to the fall of 2003. I had just returned from a year at grad school and was trying to figure out what I wanted to do next. This notion of advisory boards had really stuck with me. I approached Lisa Ventriss – then the President of the Vermont Business Roundtable – and successfully pitched a project I was calling the Peer-to-Peer Collaborative. It would gather successful, C-Suite entrepreneurs in Vermont to serve as temporary advisory boards for small but growing businesses – businesses interested in creating livable wage jobs and navigating some type of transition where some “outside eyes” could help.

Kevin Harper was one of the first people I called about the idea. He had recently sold Autumn Harp and had some time on his hands. Having supported the Job Gap Study through his Autumn Harp Foundation, he was excited to collaborate with me on the project. I think the next person I called was Lawrence Miller, who had just sold Otter Creek Brewing. I hadn't met him yet, but when I asked if he'd join the team, he immediately said “Yes – that sounds FUN!” – a classic response for those of you who know Lawrence.

Over the next 2 years, after gathering other entrepreneurs to join our merry band of peer advisors, we worked with about 15 businesses and honed our approach. For those of you in C-suite roles, you know that it is lonely to be the leader, it just is. This is another reason why VBSR is so important and has been so successful – we are doing this lonely leadership work together, in community.

Also at that time, Kevin Harper was the board chair of VSJF, and in the middle of 2005, the ED job opened up. Kevin encouraged me to apply. I was reluctant at first – I didn't think I had enough experience. But for some crazy reason, the Board gave me the job. And so, I started at VSJF – now 20 years ago. Incidentally, I brought the Peer-to-Peer Collaborative with me, and we're still working with businesses throughout Vermont to this day. Our business coaching program intensively mentors over 20 businesses a year and most of our coaches are VBSR members, folks like Beth Gilpin, Carolyn Cooke (co-founder of ISIS Clothing), Lawrence Miller, Victor Morrison (a former President at American Flatbread) – as are many of our former and current clients – like Lawson's Finest Liquids, SugarSnap Catering, Global Village Foods, and WheelPad.

Then in 2007 I made a very smart decision – I hired Janice St. Onge to be my Deputy Director. VSJF had always been authorized to provide loans, as well as grants and technical assistance to businesses, but we never had enough money to get something off the ground. I tasked Janice with figuring out what was needed in the capital access arena, and this ultimately led to the launch of the Flexible Capital Fund, L3C in 2011, with Janice serving as its President. Kevin and Lawrence also had a hand in its creation, by the way. You may recall that VBSR awarded Janice and the Flex Fund your Innovation and Inspiration Award in 2022. And in case you're interested, she is in the final stages of trying to raise a few more dollars for Flex Fund 2.0 and could really use your help – so talk to her later if you'd like to know more!

Another critically important intersection with VBSR came around the Fall of 2007, I believe. Phase 6 of the Job Gap Study had been published in 2000 – which introduced the concept of the Leaky Bucket. Doug Hoffer calculated how much money Vermonters were spending on food, wood products and energy that was leaving the state because those goods were not being produced here - even though they could be. The VBSR Policy Committee, Will Raap and your Public Policy Manager at the time, Andrea Cohen, assembled a group to discuss ideas for a possible policy slate for VBSR. Doug and I presented on the Leaky Bucket and suggested ways VBSR could support the idea, since so many VBSR members were already working in the food, forest and energy sectors.

It would take a couple of years, but during the 2009 Legislative session, VBSR teamed up with Rural Vermont and a few interested legislators, such as Will Stevens, Jason Lober and Chris Bray, to advance what became known as the Farm to Plate Investment Program. It called on VSJF to create a 10-year strategic plan to strengthen Vermont's food system by increasing local food sales, farm and food sector jobs, and providing healthy food for all Vermonters. Jed Davis from Cabot was an early collaborator in this work and has been an incredible champion and cheerleader ever since.

Over the past 15 years, we at VSJF have had the privilege of stewarding Vermont Farm to Plate, writing two 10-year strategic plans, building a network of over 300 organizations to implement the plan, and witnessing an increase of 6,500 net new jobs in the sector. Plus, local food sales have grown from \$114m in 2011 to \$481m in 2022. Jake Claro now leads this effort at VSJF.

I first met our new VBSR ED, Chelsea Bardot Lewis, in 2011 after she joined the Agency of Agriculture and began working with others to strengthen Vermont's growing livestock and meat industry. The group she helped form was one of the first teams created within the new Farm to Plate Network, and they did incredible work together over the next few years. Mark Curran, then co-owner of Black River Produce, was part of that group. Learning about the need for more meat processing infrastructure in the state is what led him to create Vermont Packinghouse and Black River Meats. As you know, he is still in the meat business!

During her tenure at Advance VT and upon her return to VBSR as ED, I got to know Roxanne Vought well. I have so much respect and admiration for her. Over a two-year period, she was part of a new initiative we're currently calling the Vermont Prosperity Project (though we're about to change the name) – a collaboration among 6 organizations working to advance a statewide conversation about what is the purpose of our economy, what makes for a good life, and how might we secure economic wellbeing for future generations in Vermont. We are interested in how our economy needs to be structured differently, to center human and planetary wellbeing. VBSR and all its members have always cared deeply about these questions. And we are excited to welcome Chelsea onto our Vermont "Steering Wheel Team" so that VBSR can continue to be part of the effort.

So why did I just share all of this history with you? As I was reflecting upon this concept of 'lifetime achievement' and the idea that we're always in the middle of time, I thought about the journey I have been on since I started at the Peace & Justice Center back in June 1990, up to today. I thought about all the people along the way who have been instrumental – not only to me personally and to my career, as mentors, advisors, collaborators and troublemakers – but also to the organizations that have been central to the work I have been a part of over time. And as the story I just wove together for you clearly illustrates, it has been VBSR and its members who have enabled, supported and promoted this work, in partnership, every step of the way.

As I reflect on the last 35 years, from my vantage point, it has been a story about the power of networks, collaboration, interconnectedness, purpose, and intentionality. It has truly been a story about the power of WE – rather than any one individual.

And I want to acknowledge that a big part of the power of WE has come from the dozens of staff members at VSJF over the years, many of whom are in this room tonight. This award tonight is as much a recognition of their contributions as it is of mine. We have been blessed with amazing staff who work hard and smart every day for the betterment of Vermonters and our state. I am inspired by them every day. And even when it's hard, we have fun together. They put up with a lot from me! They, too, are driven by our mission to nurture the economic prosperity, ecological health, and social connectivity of people, businesses, organizations and communities in Vermont for the benefit and well-being of all who live here. They are passionate about transforming the economy and improving the lives of Vermonters so that everyone's foundational, basic needs are met, within the ecological limits of our shared planet.

And I also want to thank my wife of nearly 20 years, Susanna Weller, who has been so supportive of me, and has put up with my workaholic tendencies all this time. Her values, fortitude, and strong moral compass always inspire and ground me.

As I don't need to tell any of you, it's more important than ever to pull together, united around justice, equity, democracy and our sacred planet Earth. VBSR has always been a beacon, a warm campfire to gather around, where hope is still alive and light still bursts through the darkness of these times. All you have to do is go to a VBSR get-together or the annual conference, or be in this room tonight to feel it. It FEELS DIFFERENT than going to other business conferences. There's a felt sense of a shared purpose around something bigger than just the profit motive. It's the drive to do business TOGETHER – in community and for the benefit of society and our co-workers – and in balance with the Earth. It's about our shared values around human dignity, agency and caring about others.

The story of connections and networks and relationships is not just my story – it is the story of EVERYONE in this room – and those who are no longer with us in this room. It's the heart of VBSR, really. I could not feel more humbled and honored by this award – in honor of Terry Ehrich – who I had the privilege of meeting many times. As I said to Chelsea, I wish this was called a mid-life achievement award because I still feel like I have a lot of life force energy in me to be of benefit. I hope to have another 30 years on this planet, and I want to use a lot of that time mentoring and supporting the next generation of leaders.

As a member of Gen X – I believe this is our role – historically speaking – to serve as a bridge between the Boomers and the Millennials and Gen Zers. As Boomers and some Gen Xers, we're at a point in our lives when it's time to step into a different role, as a support and mentor to the next generations. We need their skills, their perspectives, and their leadership to shine now. Think of it as a marathon baton hand-off. Since we are always in the middle of time, the kind and generous thing to do is to pass the baton firmly and confidently into the hands of the Millennials and then find meaningful ways to support their leadership. And we need to let go of any preconceived notions about HOW they should lead. Just as Boomers and Gen Xers stepped into our time to lead, they deserve the space to lead in this time, in the ways they feel and think are best.

So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you for this award. Thank you for this great honor. Thank you VBSR for all you have given to me and to VSJF over the past 30 years. We literally would not be here today if it was not for your efforts and your belief in the need for a Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund. VSJF's legacy is intertwined with VBSR's legacy. Thank you, very much.