



**Speeches given at the
Maryland Student Service Alliance
Service-Learning Recognition Reception
April 22, 2004, at the U.S. Naval Academy**



Luke Frazier

First, let me say that it is a real honor to be among so many service-learning leaders from across Maryland. You improve our quality of life and reach thousands of Marylanders. I am personally inspired by what you do.

Today I will share with you my thoughts about “organic leadership.” Organic leadership is leadership that is multi-faceted, grounded in the belief that leadership is complicated and not always entirely or necessarily slick and polished. Organic leadership, when realized, results in an impact that is somehow greater than the sum of its component parts. My remarks will end with the same question that I will start with: How do leaders become leaders? Are leaders just natural born leaders? Are leaders a product of their environment and training? Or are leaders created when random opportunities erupt from the world at large? And how does the amorphous notion of “the hero?” fit into all this...are heroes leaders too?

The story that leaders emerge born free and unspoiled from an incubator of goodness has a certain appeal, but it just doesn't ring true. There are plenty of leaders with flaws, just consider history both ancient and contemporary. Leaders in this room would freely admit to their flaws and foibles as leaders. Not many leaders, if any, assume positions of leadership based on being pure as the driven snow. If we had to wait for leaders that pure, we would have to pretty much shut down Washington. No, flaws don't stop people from being leaders, nor should they, and in some cases it builds credibility among those who follow a leader, believe in a leader, invest in a leader if they know their leader faces struggles and issues of their own. Again, history is replete with examples. But at the same time, there is surely something about an innate ability to advance an agenda, move a group of people, articulate a stirring vision that is not learned. It seems to derive from a “place before birth,” if you will, an unconscious wisdom too subtle for words. So naturally occurring characteristics are part of organic leadership.

Likewise, the story that leaders are “robots” made in a lab of training and technical assistance also makes sense on its own. The leader who is a total blank slate and functions like an automaton by calculating decisions based on cold data and dispassionate analysis is not realistic. If there is no feeling, no gut check, then an essential ingredient for certain leadership tasks will be missing. A leader made up of all form and no substance garners little trust and receives little warmth from those they lead and engage. Although a leader made capable by training and their environment can achieve great things, they cannot ultimately reach the deepest meaning of leadership. They will not reach the transformational state of organic leadership where the whole of their leadership exceeds the parts. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the concept of “gestalt,” which is what I am describing when I say organic leadership adds up to a unified configuration with properties that cannot be derived from its parts. The idea that mixing properties creates something not just “better” in a functional sense, but better because it transcends the ordinary is a powerful idea. The environment that shapes leaders, the training that is given so that leaders can excel, combines with the innate tendencies I just finished describing. I find the concept and psychology of gestalt fascinating...but of course I also find my two year old's automatic dump truck race track fascinating—to the point where he runs to his mom and complains that I won't let him have his turn. In any event, technical skills are important for a leader, as long as they are combined with a fire from within.

The idea that random opportunities create leaders is a bit defeating. If this is so, then there is no reason to strive to become a leader, to respond to a sustained call for leadership, to attempt to understand oneself and one's abilities and environmental influences. Random opportunities may play a role in the expression of leadership, to be sure, but I reject the notion that "randomness" is a major factor in the organic leadership equation. Organic leadership demands ongoing opportunities that allow for the flow of natural qualities and the manifestation of skills. An unused book never teaches or delights a reader, just like an untapped leader doesn't add value to the world.

Finally, the concept of "the hero" and how it relates to organic leadership is intriguing. In some ways, a hero is simply a time-limited leader...someone who is thrust into a role to save the day, the project, the school, etc. After the need is met, the hero may ride off into the sunset or recede to their customary role in a group or community. Heroes typically are self-effacing, insisting that what they did was only done out of necessity or that it was only something anyone else would do in similar circumstances. Leadership, conversely, takes someone who will step up and say what needs to be done and why...and react with purpose when something comes up. So is a hero not part of the equation for organic leadership? Ultimately I would say that a hero is a part of the equation for one simple reason: spontaneity. The heroes' spontaneity adds to organic leadership because it is not innate, not a product of training, and different than opportunity in its immediacy and demands.

So of course it takes all four aspects of leadership to make an organic whole, something that might be a bit unrefined, raw, earthy, and rich. Organic Leadership is nothing if not real, stripped of artifice, not put on for appearances. Organic Leadership means tapping into the flame in your heart that is dying to share your vision, your confidence, and your ability. It means honing your skills through service-learning activities, practicing habits of citizenship, learning from models and mentors you are lucky enough to have. It means becoming a stronger leader because you have the benefit of natural qualities, a favorable environment, opportunities, and a bit of the hero in your soul.

There are leaders present in this room, we can all feel the energy of the things that have been done and the things that will get done. Everybody here leads. Everybody imprints leadership in their own way. As I asked in the beginning, How does a leader become a leader? The answer is clear: by embracing your natural self, striving to learn and gain knowledge about what leadership means, watching for opportunities to step forward, and looking to discover the hero within. That's how a leader becomes an organic leader.



Shayla Hunter

My name is Shayla Hunter and I am currently an eleventh grader at W.E.B. DuBois High School. I was awarded a Service Star from the Maryland Student Service Alliance last year and would like to congratulate this year's award recipients. It has truly been an honor to have received the award and stand here to share with you a few things that I've done to impact my community.

During my ninth grade year, I was a part of the S.H.O.P. (Students Helping Other People) Team. It is a group of students who devote themselves and their time to promote violence-free and drug-free lifestyles. We worked effectively to produce change in our community. Some of the activities included feeding the homeless on Thanksgiving Day, presenting a MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) presentation to the entire school, doing a clothing and food drive to help those who were less fortunate, and on October 31, 2001, we traveled to Genesis Nursing Home where we prepared a Halloween Party for the elderly.

Another activity of which I committed myself was teaching a group of fourth graders science at Yorkwood Elementary School. I was a member of Irvine, an environmental science group formed to make students more aware of nature. We took the time out of our busy schedules to learn science activities and then teach them to the elementary students in a fun and exciting manner. It was a fun-filled experience. I truly believe that working to help others helps mold me as an individual. I really enjoy using my talents and skills to be helpful to others and I know that people are extremely appreciative of my services.

How can others learn from you? Convincing your friends and family members to help the community will soon bring on positive change everywhere. Nothing will be accomplished if we don't work together as a team. So, get in gear for tomorrow's change.



Bill Ekey

I'm humbled and grateful for this recognition. I'm certain that there are many principals in Maryland who do more to support and promote service learning than me. But please know that I am deeply honored to be here this afternoon.

And it's a bit surprising that I'm here today. In fact it's surprising that I'm the principal of C. Milton Wright High School. I had planned to retire in October 2003. I was working in the Research Department in our school system and was no longer enjoying my work. In September, the Superintendent called me and said that she had an unexpected principal vacancy and asked me to fill in for a while.

But let me properly start this story at the beginning. In 1985 I became an assistant principal at Bel Air High School. I worked for Paul Skarzenski, a principal who had a powerful influence on me. I admired Paul for a lot of reasons, but I admired him most for his belief that his job was to create conditions that allowed teachers to be as effective as possible. Without being very conscious of it at that time, I adopted that belief also and it has influenced my work and my decisions.

When Paul retired, I took his place as principal. After six years, I moved to C. Milton Wright High School but I stayed there for only one year. In 1997 I became the Director of Secondary Education and worked as a part of the Superintendent's staff. I made that change because I believed at the time there was a need to create conditions to let middle and high school principals be as effective as possible. I didn't realize at the time how much I would miss being a high school principal.

Did you ever find something and you didn't know you were looking for it until you discovered it? That happened to me one day in the Franklin-Covey store in Towson. I was waiting for a purchase to be completed and I was looking through some business cards for the store that were on the counter. Each card had a different quote on it. I found one with a quote from the British author George Eliot. She said, "What do we live for if not to make life less difficult for each other." That resonated with me. I realized that I had been looking for a simple way to define what was central to my work. My job was to make life less difficult for other people. I took that card, by the way, and still have it taped to the note paper holder on my desk.

As the Director of Secondary Education, I had responsibility for the service learning program in Harford County. I had the opportunity to work with our Service Learning Fellows and our building coordinators. And I recognized that these teachers believed passionately that their role was to help students understand how to "make life less difficult" for other people. So it was natural and easy for me to support them and to find ways to recognize their efforts.

As Director, I had the opportunity to streamline our program and, I believe, to make it more effective. By better coordinating the service learning initiatives of teachers, we increased the value and meaning of service learning activities for students. We started an annual recognition of service stars – both students and teachers – every spring, and we publicized the good things that were being done on behalf of others. Certainly I'm here today in part because of the opportunities I had to work with dedicated and committed teachers in a role different from high school principal.

Over the course of a school year, within a classroom, a teacher can see her impact on students. Within a school, a principal can see his impact on the teachers and students and parents. At the central office level, in a large system, it's much more difficult to perceive one's impact on other people. At least that was my experience, and it was very frustrating. Increasingly I felt like I wasn't making a difference. So in my 30th year in Harford County, I left the Superintendent's staff and moved to the Research Office.

In the Research Office I worked with testing and data. And I had fewer opportunities than ever in my career to "make life less difficult" for other people. I missed the principal's role and decided that I would like to return to a school and to feel like I was making a difference. But that was not to be, so I decided to retire. September 30, 2003, was scheduled to be my last day.

About three weeks before my retirement date, the superintendent talked to me. She said that she had an unexpected temporary need for a principal at C. Milton Wright High School, and she asked me to do that. That need became permanent, and I'm pleased that I will be able to continue to serve as the school's principal.

As a principal, I support service learning activities mostly by staying out of the way and doing what our service learning building coordinator tells me to do. When necessary, I remind teachers to complete their planning forms and to finish their service learning activities. I read the reports. And, perhaps most important, I recognize the students and staff who have provided service to others, whether that's been through a formal service learning activity or through other initiatives.

I'm fortunate to be in a school where service has been a theme. I see that exemplified at C. Milton Wright High School in two ways: through service to the environment and through service to others.

We have a strong environmental science program, and many of our students put in a lot of hours working for the environment. We have a very active recycling program. In November, 85 students and a dozen teachers spent a Saturday planting, mulching, and performing a major cleaning of our school property. Today about 50 students spent part of their day installing tree shelters on 1800 seedlings on property across the street from the school.

If you visit my school and spend even a few minutes with the students, you can perceive the sense of service to others that is shared by most. When I've written letters of recommendation for my seniors and I ask about their community activities, they almost always have done volunteer work or have given back to people in their community.

A small example of what this looks like: A group of students wanted to provide donuts, cards, and flowers to our custodians to show appreciation for their work in our school. This was the students' idea, conceived and planned and carried out without help from any adults.

My advanced foreign language students spend two afternoons each week after school in our elementary schools teaching French and Spanish and German to fifth graders. My foods students come back to school to serve guests for evening functions. My girls' lacrosse team spent a Saturday with younger kids in a recreation program teaching them the fundamentals of the game. I have a very strong Master Tutor program in which juniors and seniors work with less capable and disabled students and serve as tutors and role models. I don't think they'd articulate this, but my students have internalized the obligation they have to others, and they, in fact, make life less difficult for other people.

This year we scheduled our ninth grade students on teams. We call this the Mustang Transition Program, and the teachers on each team meet at least once a week to discuss students and instruction. As a part of the program, the ninth graders are in advisory periods to start each day. Each of the 25 advisories – like homerooms – include two senior mentors. We have 50 seniors who agreed to give up their mornings all year to be with the freshmen. The senior mentors have had some training, and they often teach mini-lessons to the ninth graders about character, behavior, work ethic, and other topics.

Sarah Zeithen, a senior who is coordinator for the mentor program, wrote an essay about the character education component of the program. I want to quote at length from Sarah's essay.

”After the Six Pillars of Character lessons were taught to the freshmen, we planned larger activities and lessons that applied to the Six Pillars. Caring was the first Pillar that we concentrated on. As a component of a Service Learning activity, each freshman advisory adopted a family during the holiday season through the *Neighbors in Need* program. A total of twenty-four families were provided for by C. Milton Wright during this past winter. When the Caring lesson was presented to freshman advisories, helping others in need, being kind and compassionate, and showing that you care were the main ideas. All of these qualities were expressed when the freshmen participated in this activity. They pulled together a dinner, various items in need, and gifts to families that would have otherwise had nothing during the holiday season. Applying the lessons taught the freshmen how important it is to utilize what they had learned to make the world a better place. Albert Pike, a Scottish Rite Freemason, once said ‘What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us; what we have done for others and the world remains and is immortal.’ While participating in this activity, the students realized the importance of these words. Many learned for the first time what it felt like to help someone in need. They saw that they could and did make a lasting impression in someone else’s life.”

Probably far more important than the concrete things a principal can do to promote service learning is the climate he can foster and the attitude he can show to the school community. I think I’ve used the few talents I possess to make life less difficult for teachers and students. But we are at our best when we teach our students to help others, to improve life for our fellow travelers on this planet.

I’m most comfortable and receive the greatest personal satisfaction by helping others through my role as a school principal. It’s natural for me to recognize and appreciate the many ways in which service is provided by others. I’m proud to work in a school where that attitude is pervasive.

There have been some days since September when I thought that maybe I should have retired. But truly I love what I’m doing, and I want to give everything I can in the best way I know how. Because when I leave this life, I’ll take nothing with me. So while I’m here, I can give my money, my time, and my possessions. But what I’m really giving is myself. What I can do to make life less difficult for others isn’t just important. It is, perhaps, all there is.