
Committee Meeting

of

ASSEMBLY HOUSING COMMITTEE

*“Presentation by Heather French, the current Miss America,
concerning her work for homeless veterans”*

LOCATION: Committee Room 9
State House Annex
Trenton, New Jersey

DATE: March 6, 2000
2:00 p.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Assemblyman John V. Kelly, Chairman
Assemblywoman Carol J. Murphy, Vice-Chairwoman
Assemblyman David C. Russo
Assemblyman Jerry Green
Assemblywoman Nellie Pou



ALSO PRESENT:

Joyce W. Murray
*Office of Legislative Services
Committee Aide*

John G. Murphy
*Assembly Majority
Committee Aide*

Gabriela Mosquera
*Assembly Democratic
Committee Aide*

***Meeting Recorded and Transcribed by
The Office of Legislative Services, Public Information Office,
Hearing Unit, State House Annex, PO 068, Trenton, New Jersey***

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ASSEMBLYMAN JOHN V. KELLY (Chairman): May I have your attention?

For those that are interested in that eviction bill, it's being held, so you don't have to stick around, okay?

Okay.

We have -- it's my honor to introduce a young lady to all of you. It's Miss America.

Miss America, come on.

Her name is Heather French.

She's educated from the University of Cincinnati. She's got a -- she's pursuing a master's degree in fashion and design, and I don't want to go on and on and on, but she has -- but she's going to address us on something I think of as very interesting, homelessness for veterans.

H E A T H E R F R E N C H: Yes, thank you so much.

Am I on? (referring to PA microphone)

ASSEMBLYMAN KELLY: You're on, and you're being recorded--

MS. FRENCH: Right.

ASSEMBLYMAN KELLY: --for posterity.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MURPHY: Is the red light on? (referring to PA microphone)

MS. FRENCH: First of all, I would just like to thank you for letting me come and speak before you today on a homeless veterans' situation. And as Miss America, I applaud the State of New Jersey on your proactiveness on homeless veterans' initiatives. With 7000 homeless veterans in your state,

you're really taking a great step forward to take care of them, and I applaud that.

A lot of people have asked me, as a 25-year-old fashion designer, why I care about veterans' situations and concerns. I care because I am the daughter of a disabled Vietnam veteran, first and foremost.

At four years old, my father started taking me into the VA hospital, which at that time the VA was an all-day event. He would take me in, and for four and six hours while he was receiving his treatment, I got to hear the most incredible stories. And I learned the most valuable lesson, so far, to date, and that was when you're concerning veterans, listen to them, not just with open ears, but open hearts, because it doesn't just make a difference in how you treat our veterans, it makes the difference in how you respect them and respect their service that they gave, because they were willing to pay an ultimate sacrifice for you and I.

And as I grew up, I never forgot those experiences. And as I went to college, I volunteered at a homeless shelter in Cincinnati, Ohio, and I learned that over half of the men and women we were serving at that shelter were decorated veterans. It broke my heart. I found out that we have 275,000 homeless veterans in this country. Ten thousand of those homeless veterans are also women veterans. We're starting to see a large population of women veterans coming out from the woodwork, and what we need to work on is not just temporary fixes for these veterans, but permanent solutions.

For too long we have prided ourselves on never leaving our wounded behind, but, ladies and gentlemen, to date, over one-third of the homeless population, being veterans, are left behind. And when I speak about

permanent solutions, I'm not just talking about clothing and food. And although those are great additives to taking care of the situation, what we actually need is funding for education training programs that get them into transitional housing, and then we can get them permanent housing. Because, you see, veterans who have been put through rehabilitative services have a very high success rate for making it through drug and alcohol prevention, and then going into transitional units, where they often go through programs, such as CWT, which is Compensated Work Therapy programs, which the VA administers. And through that program, they are put into transitional units that show them responsibility to take care of themselves. Self-sufficiency is what we are looking for for these veterans so that they can take care of themselves. So, it's not really a handout, it's really a hands up to a better life, trying to get them to be more responsible for their life and for others around them.

And by going through those transitional units, we should be able to get them permanent housing. Affordable permanent housing, not just subsidized housing that looks just good enough to have -- for human habitation, but good housing because our veterans deserve that, because we promised them that we would take care of them upon their service to our country.

And when I look at them, it's not as if I'm looking at just those faces that serve, but I'm looking at the men and women who did not make it home. I'm looking at the 58,000 names on that Vietnam War Memorial in Washington. When I have gone around the country, I've gone around 20,000

miles per month. That's a lot of miles to cover, and so my eyes and my hands and my heart serve as a field representative for those men and women.

I get to see the good, the bad, and the ugly and the pretty, and let me tell you what, there are some great success stories out there. There are men and women who have made it through, and as I show this crown to people around the country, I say, "You know, this doesn't just represent Heather French as Miss America, but it represents the daughter of a disabled Vietnam veteran."

We have 27 million veterans in our country, and every sparkle in this crown, I am proud to say, represents who they are. It represents that flag, The Star-Spangled Banner, and every time I put my hand over my heart it represents those men and women who did not make it home, as well.

I was down in a VA medical center in Dallas, Texas, at a spinal cord unit, and a gentleman came up to me to pick out his stone in my crown. And he said, "Which stone can be mine?" Well, I always say, "The big stones are taken by the Marines." That's it. But he said, "It doesn't matter. I want to be that small stone in the front of your crown." And I said, "It would be my honor to represent you as I go across the country."

And another veteran came up to me with a very special gift, and he said, "On the days that you're tired, I want to give you a gift that you remember what you're fighting for, you remember when you don't feel like you can take another step, when you don't feel like you can speak before another committee, you take this as a symbol of freedom for our country and know that freedom is not free." And so this gentleman gave me his purple heart, and I carry this every day with me. Every day I show it to people as a symbol of

what their country is meant to be, that these men and women, they're more than just homeless people. They're more than a statistic. They are a family. They once had a husband or a wife. They had children, and they once were children of someone, of a mother and a father.

And yes, there are many problems, not just external disabilities, but inward disabilities that need to be taken care of that -- that's why we need specialized programs and specialized housing for these men and women, because it's those specialized needs that we have to take care of first. And they have earned it, and I always say, "It's time to bring them home, because in America they have earned a home, and it is called America."

And it's time to live up to our promise, and I want to ensure, as Miss America 2000, that I reach out to as many veterans as I can that need my help. And I will use my voice, a bold voice if I have to, to be an advocate for them because I want to help bring them into the new century with us.

Thank you so much for allowing me to speak before you today, and thank you for your ears and your kind patience.

Thanks.

ASSEMBLYMAN KELLY: We normally don't clap, but we're clapping today. (applause)

I don't think the veterans could ask for a better speaker or an advocate, believe me.

Any comments from you, Vice-Chair?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MURPHY: No, I'm in total agreement with you and with Miss America.

Thank you very much for coming and allowing us to hear you.

MS. FRENCH: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN RUSSO: No, congratulations -- like your effort.

MR. MURPHY (Majority Aide): Yes, congratulations.

MS. FRENCH: Thank you

ASSEMBLYMAN KELLY: Nellie?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN POU: Miss America, let me just say that I was listening very, very carefully to everything that you were saying, and my heart was pounding because I was like, you could not have gotten a better representative going around the country and voicing the kind of concerns and sharing it with the incredible compassion and passion that you have just demonstrated here today.

I not only congratulate you, but I'm very, very proud to see someone like yourself as young -- that can do so many other things, and have taken so very seriously a concern and a passion or a need that is so incredibly needed out there.

So, with that, I say to you that I know that the veterans today, and hopefully the veterans of tomorrow, will have a better place because of people like yourself that is making it possible for all of them.

God bless you, and thank you on your job, and good luck on your journey. You certainly have a long journey.

Thank you.

MS. FRENCH: Thank you so much.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN KELLY: It's been a pleasure.

Assemblyman Green?

ASSEMBLYMAN GREEN: Just wanted to congratulate you. Your speech was just great, and I'm just happy that you're not running for president.

MR. FRENCH: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN POU: Well, who knows?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MURPHY: I think you should run for president.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN POU: Who knows? A woman president -- not bad.

ASSEMBLYMAN KELLY: You almost have ten times around the world when you finish this, your tour, right?

That's 240,000 miles.

MS. FRENCH: Pretty much, and I get to keep all my frequent flyer miles, just so you know.

ASSEMBLYMAN KELLY: Again it was nice -- it was nice meeting you and hearing you.

MS. FRENCH: Thank you so much again.

Thank you.

(PRESENTATION CONCLUDED)