

## **Senator Janet Petersen's Opening Day Speech for 2019 (as prepared for delivery)**

Thank you, President Schneider.

Welcome to the Iowa Senate and the beginning of the 2019 Legislative Session.

Welcome back to our returning Senators and staff and a warm welcome to our new Senators, pages, clerks and staff.

The Iowa Senate has called this chamber home for more than 130 years.

The laws and budgets we pass or don't pass this session have the ability to impact the lives of every Generation living in our state today – and Generations who will be sitting in our chairs long after we are gone.

We have six generations represented in this chamber – the Greatest Generation, the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and even Generation Z with our Senate Pages.

I fall into the category of Generation X. I have seen how public policies and leaders can shape our lives and even impact our future.

My pathway to public service began with my mom – a member of the Silent Generation.

She is the youngest of 10 children. Her mom, my grandma, was born in 1891. My grandparents had children in public schools for

## **Senator Janet Petersen's Opening Day Speech for 2019 (as prepared for delivery)**

nearly 50 consecutive years and each one of them graduated from high school.

With 10 kids, you can imagine, my maternal grandparents didn't have much money. Social Security wasn't offered to farm families until the mid-1950s when my mom was in high school.

When the federal government made a decision to let farmers and domestic workers sign up for Social Security – my mom took her parents to the nearest city to apply.

My grandma was born before the state of Missouri kept birth records so she brought a family Bible that had her birthdate written in it and letters attesting to its accuracy from her living siblings. Fortunately, the federal government accepted it as proof. It was Social Security and Medicare that gave my grandma enough economic security to stay in her home until she was 97. It also allowed her children to focus forward on the financial needs of their own families instead of worrying about their mom.

My mom got to go to college thanks to small acts of kindness from people who wanted to help her succeed.

My uncle Earl was one of those people. He is a quiet, unassuming man – a retired pig farmer who lives in Bedford, Iowa.

As a new farmer, he gave his little sister an old sow and told her she could have the litter. That helped pay for a year of her college.

## **Senator Janet Petersen's Opening Day Speech for 2019 (as prepared for delivery)**

My grandpa made a similar deal with her another year.

And a woman from Bedford who had taught home ec at my mom's high school just across the state line in Missouri encouraged my mom to go to college, and offered her an interest-free loan. My mom took her up on her offer and borrowed \$300, which she paid back before she graduated.

My mom was lucky. College was within reach for families – even if you grew up without means. And she had amazing public school teachers who pushed her to follow her dreams.

We must work together to put the opportunity to go to college and community college back in the hands of more Iowa families. And we cannot afford to strap our Millennials and Generation Z with student debt – that holds them back from getting married, starting a family, and starting a new business.

My mom left Missouri and moved to Iowa for a job – as a high school home ec teacher in Brooklyn. There, she met my dad – the ag teacher. Unlike my mom, my dad was an only child. My grandparents met on my grandpa's family farm in Denmark while they were teenagers.

My grandpa dreamed of coming to the United States and at 22 he left Denmark and made his way to West Branch to farm. Five years later, he had enough money to go back to Denmark to ask my grandma to marry him. This was just a few years before WWII.

## **Senator Janet Petersen's Opening Day Speech for 2019 (as prepared for delivery)**

My grandma followed my grandpa back to the United States two weeks later– not knowing a word of English. They spoke Danish at home and relied on public school teachers to help my dad learn English.

Immigrants make our state stronger. I am so proud to be the granddaughter of immigrants. I am proud of the financial assistance other immigrants offered me in the form of a college scholarship. I am also proud of our state's reputation of supporting refugees. Democrats stand ready to work on immigration policy that will help our state's economy and continue its reputation of being a welcoming place to live.

My parents taught school in Brooklyn and Pella before Pioneer Hi-Bred recruited my dad away from teaching to Des Moines when my mom was pregnant with me.

Three years later, my mom would find herself a single parent with two young girls to raise after losing my dad to cancer.

My sister Barb and I are so grateful our mom had an education to fall back on when she needed to re-enter the workforce to keep our family out of poverty. Democrats believe public education is the great equalizer.

As my mom looked for work, the minister at our church, Jim Kratz, encouraged her to apply for a new job – as a lobbyist for a coalition of various faith communities who were coming together to push social justice policies.

I watched her spend her career standing up for people and being

## Senator Janet Petersen's Opening Day Speech for 2019 (as prepared for delivery)

a strong voice for people who needed it most.

Each generation is impacted by previous generations...

Both of my grandmas were born before women had the right to vote.

Today, just two generations later in my family – I serve as a leader in the Iowa Senate, and our state has its first elected female governor, we have gender balance in our federal delegation in Washington, DC, and more women than ever before are serving in the Iowa Legislature.

Next year, 2020, will mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's right to vote. **Let's put Iowans at the front of the line in elections.** IT IS TIME to expand voting rights for our next generation. Let's restore voting rights for felons. Let's help every Iowa teen-ager, angler, hunter, taxpayer and new citizen get automatic voter registration. We should be doing all we can to make Iowa the #1 voting state in the nation to go along with our status as the first caucus state in the nation.

We can make this happen.

My grandpa was born the year the bicycle was invented. My grandma was born the year before the first gasoline-powered tractor was invented in Clayton County, Iowa.

My parents were born the same year as Iowa State University (then Iowa State College) built the first automatic electronic digital computer that weighed 700 pounds. I was born the same

## **Senator Janet Petersen's Opening Day Speech for 2019 (as prepared for delivery)**

year the pocket calculator was invented and my youngest was born the year the iPhone was invented.

Getting electricity to rural areas was the issue of my grandparents' generation.

Let's help more Iowans enjoy the many advantages of innovative renewable energy and renewable fuels – to help lower their utility bills and reduce our dependence on foreign oil. Unfortunately, last year's energy power grab legislation pushed by Republican lawmakers, the Governor and government-protected energy monopolies shoved Iowans to the back of the line, making energy efficiency less accessible to hard-working Iowans and seniors.

Communications is one of the biggest infrastructure needs of our time. No matter where you live in Iowa, you should have access to technology. Let's make a commitment to put Iowans at the front of the line for access to technology before another multi-billion dollar company gets access to another big check from the economic development cookie jar.

Let's put workers and businesses begging for a bigger, more skilled workforce at the front of the line this year. Democrats will be at the center of the fight to fully fund job training programs and apprenticeships that help Iowa workers get better opportunities for a decent life and human dignity.

Instead of campaign rhetoric and empty promises, we need to offer Iowans a brighter future. It's time to give Iowans a raise, provide equal pay for equal work, safe pregnancy accommodations in the workplace, affordable safe child care options, and let's quit sticking it to Iowa taxpayers to subsidize

## **Senator Janet Petersen's Opening Day Speech for 2019 (as prepared for delivery)**

low-wage employers who don't pay enough for their employees to have a decent place to live and enough money to feed their families. Democrats stand ready to reward businesses that put their employees at the front of the line.

When we put people at the front of the line, good things can happen.

Instead of "reforming" stuff that isn't broken, let's fix the things that are broken like...

- 1) Medicaid Privatization – Let's finally get honest answers and more accountability for Iowa Medicaid recipients, health care providers and taxpayers.
- 2) Protecting our Children - It shouldn't be too much to ask to put our kids at the front of the line.

**Today, I renew my call to get rid of the Statute of Limitations that puts the rights of serial predators ahead of survivors. As William Paul Young, author of "The Shack," once said: *"I don't think there is anything that is the equivalent of sexual abuse that tears apart the fabric of the human soul. It empowers the lies of shame."***

- 3) Let's Care for Our Seniors
  - There's no reason to push seniors to the back of the line by "fixing" or "tweaking" a retirement system doesn't need to be fixed. Hard-working Iowans deserve retirement security.
- 4) Let's Keep Our Promises

## **Senator Janet Petersen's Opening Day Speech for 2019 (as prepared for delivery)**

- Let's keep our promises by fully funding the water quality initiative and mental health expansion...and let's not renege on any promises that will result in higher property taxes for homeowners!!!

5) And let's restore safe health care for women

- Republicans "reformed" family planning program has not improved access – in fact, participation has dropped more than 70 percent. Democrats stand ready to help women – especially those in rural areas and small towns – get access to affordable health care.

When we lift up Iowans, we create a better society for all.

Finally, I renew my commitment today to Senators Whitver and Schneider to continue working in a bipartisan manner to make the Iowa Capitol a safe environment for everyone. That includes making appropriate changes to the Senate's Code of Ethics and Harassment Prevention Policy to ensure better pathways to justice.

Thank you to my Iowa Senate Democratic colleagues and staff for their support. It is an honor to be part of a team of people who have such a heart for public service. I promise to listen, to learn and to fight for bluer skies in Iowa's future.

Now, let's get to work!!