

Remarks: Jon Bon Jovi
World Habitat Day
October 5, 2009
National Building Museum
Washington, D.C.

Thank you, Secretary Donovan, for that kind introduction.

Congratulations to all of today's honorees.
I want to thank you for your inspiring work.

I'd also like to recognize the work that H.U.D. is doing. Under Secretary Donovan's watch, the people who are in need have been given a face and a voice. H.U.D. is not just implementing policies and programs to build communities and homes but is championing green, sustainable development.

I'm honored to have this opportunity to join you here today. I understand that for some the name 'Jon Bon Jovi' on today's list of guest speakers might have raised an eyebrow.

So, I'd like to take a few moments to share with you how I became involved in community service, became an advocate for affordable housing, and why I'm part of the greater conversation we're having on World Habitat Day.

Like each of you, I've grown into the person I am today. I am a husband, a parent, and a concerned, committed citizen of the world. By trade (as I hope some of you know) I am an entertainer, the singer in a somewhat successful rock 'n' roll band.

For the past twenty-five years, I've toured these United States and across most of Europe. I've been to Asia, Africa, Australia, Central and South America. I have seen progress and I have seen change, some for the better and some not. The world is in a constant state of change. In my eyes, it's become smaller, more accessible, and more interdependent. We are more connected to one another than ever before and so are compelled to help those we see in need. Because now, more than ever, no man is an island.

But where does one begin? Pick a topic. From free trade to famine, climate change to civil unrest, health care reform to homelessness... the challenges seem overwhelming.

Some issues are so big they're hard to wrap your mind around them. It would be easy to accept defeat. To think you couldn't possibly make a dent. But you would be wrong.

Over the years, I've been asked to lend my name and efforts to many worthwhile causes and I'd done so, happy to help. But it's only within the last five years that my personal goals for philanthropy and community service have come into clear focus.

So what did I do you ask? I bought a football franchise.
(Stay with me on this.)

In 2004, I became the co-owner of an arena football team. We didn't name the team after an aggressive animal or warrior. We named it the Philadelphia Soul. I didn't care if you were a Bon Jovi fan. I didn't care if you were a football fan. Everyone believes they have soul. And the soul of our organization was our commitment to make a positive difference in our community. We wanted winners on the field and off. So, before we played our first down, before we sold our first ticket, we found local causes who were underserved and in need of our help. We took our first dollar and partnered with four worthy charities.

Whether it was The Northern Home for Children, a foster home which didn't have a playground or computers...
Or the local Covenant House that didn't have enough beds...
Or the AIDS hospice that flat-out needed money...
Whatever anyone needed, the Soul would try to find a way to help.

The cornerstone of the franchise's identity was our community service and we established ourselves over the first few seasons, by my playing the role of Robin Hood.

But our foundation's real focus (and my inspiration) came on a cold winter night in Philadelphia. I was staring out a hotel window when I saw a homeless man sleeping outside City Hall.

I didn't want to just help *him*, I wanted to "fix *IT*."
In America, the richest nation on the planet, and in Philadelphia, the birthplace of our nation, we had neighbors living in poverty without so much as adequate shelter. I don't believe this was the America our forefathers envisioned.

I've come to realize that homelessness is an equal opportunity offender. It doesn't discriminate.
It affects young and old, black and white, Christians, Muslims, Jews alike.
It doesn't care if you're Republican or Democrat.
Or whether you're from Washington, D.C. or sunny Los Angeles.

BUT homelessness is an issue WE can address without having to wait for scientists to develop a pill or discover a cure.

It is a crisis we can tackle.

It will take money.

And it will take sweat and time and the patience to persevere.

I'm a big believer in what I like to call "The Power of We," the idea that when WE work together WE can accomplish incredible things. The core belief is that WE can and will make a difference.

The Power of We is the voice that says

- We ARE our brothers' and sisters' keeper.
- We are only as healthy as the families in need of health care
- We are only as wealthy as someone going to bed hungry or sleeping on a grate tonight.

So from our franchise's commitment to community we created the Soul Foundation.

We're a small non-profit organization which initiates partnerships with other established non-profits, government agencies, impassioned heads-of-state, corporate financiers, philanthropic professionals, and individuals, the moms and pops of the private sector.

And like anything successful - a football franchise, a rock band - it takes teamwork.

We've worked as hard on this Foundation as on anything ever in my life.

We live and we learn each and every day.

And it's been an incredible education.

My mentor, these years has been a Sister of Mercy, Sister Mary Scullion, the founder of Philadelphia's Project H.O.M.E.

During one of my many visits with Sister Mary, we toured a street in one of North Philadelphia's most rundown neighborhoods. The homes were in horrible disrepair. It was the kind of place where mothers were too scared to let their children play outside and the elderly residents hid after sundown. Even the police avoided these blocks. Yet these rundown rowhomes stood right alongside those of other longtime, good neighbors who worked hard to make their house a home and their streets safe.

The question was how could we bridge these two realities?

Sister Mary asked for help. Could the Soul Foundation possibly provide the funding to rebuild one of these homes? I asked what it would take to rebuild the block.

It wasn't just about money. They say it takes a village. Well, it does (and then some.) But within a year of that conversation, Project H.O.M.E. and the Soul Foundation had renovated fifteen rowhouses on that block - all green - and fifteen families had a place to call home.

I'd like to share one of the stories of that build.

On a visit to the construction site, I had a conversation with Helen Brown, who is a longtime resident of the neighborhood, and friend to Project H.O.M.E. She was sweeping the sidewalk in front of her house. I stopped and asked, "Mrs. Brown, this block is awfully clean. Have you been sweeping it all by yourself?"

She said, "No, I've had plenty of help pushing this end of the broom. It's pushed more than dirt; it's pushed away the bad guys. But just in case they come back... I've got *this* end of the broom."

The Power of We reclaimed that block.

Our work in Philadelphia may have started small but we continue to think big. To date, the Soul Foundation is responsible for OVER 200 units of affordable housing (from Houma, Louisiana to Los Angeles, from Detroit to Newark, New Jersey.)

I'm very proud of what we've accomplished so far but we know there is a lot more work to be done.

But we did it one house, one street, one neighborhood, one city...
One Soul at a time...

See, I told you if you stuck with me my story would make sense.
Sorta.

Buying a sports team as a pathway to philanthropy is surely a unique strategy.

And if The Rock Star & The Nun doesn't sound like the basis of a reality show nothing does.

But it worked. For us.

So don't be afraid to think outside the lines.

Get creative.

Look for the unconventional partners.

Seek out the unique fundraising opportunities.

The challenges ahead are too big to not think big.

I believe that change is coming.

But CHANGE can not be just a political campaign slogan.
It's not a bumper-sticker or a t-shirt.
CHANGE doesn't happen just by wishing for it.

People want to help those in need; they just need to know how.

Each one of you here today is here because you believe we can affect change. You believe we can improve the lives of those in need.

Government can't do it alone. The private sector can't do it alone.

But together, and through the Power of We, we can and we will.

Today, we acknowledge and we celebrate.

Tomorrow it's back to work...

Together, raising the voices of the many in unison and as one.

Thank you.