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MRS. REAGAN: CARDINAL GIBBONS MEDAL
OCTOBER 11, 1986

Thank you, , for those very kind remarks and for this wonderful honor.

You know my husband loves to tell stories. And one of his favorites is about the man who became the chairman of the local fundraising drive. And in the course of his duties, he went to see the richest man in the town, who had never given anything--not a cent.

So he said to the man, "Our records show you've never contributed anything to our charity." And the man said, "Well, do your records show I have a brother who had an accident and can't provide for himself? Do your records show I have a widowed sister with several children and no father to support them?"

And the chairman said, "No, our records don't show that."

And the man said, "Well, I don't give anything to them. Why should I give anything to you?"

Well, I want to thank you for what you've given me this evening. You've given me the Cardinal Gibbons Medal, for which I'm genuinely grateful and honored. And you've also given me something else--the chance to talk with you about a

devastating problem in this country--the problem of drug abuse.

Tonight I'd like to focus on one question that I've been asked time and again over the past five years of my work. That question is why. Why do our children, who have so much to live for, why do they use drugs?

Why do they give up their health, their future, their families, their faith, their identities, and sometimes their lives? Why do they risk all that life has to offer for a chemical reaction? And another thing I hear so heartbreakingly often--why my child?.

I recently received a very moving letter from a woman in the Southwest. Although she never specifically raises the question of why, it burns through every word she writes. I'd like to read part of her letter to you.

May 21, 1986 2 a.m.

Dear Mrs. Reagan,

I can't sleep, I miss my son. He died of a massive overdose of heroin. He was 24 years old. He had a 25th birthday last week; but he wasn't here; he missed coming around on Mother's Day, too. My other five children were here, but a part of my heart was missing...

David used to miss other Mother's Days and birthdays, mine and his; and I would be hurt and I would be angry at him the next time he showed up--he always came by later, when he was broke or hungry, and I guess, maybe just needed to know that I was there and that I cared.

This year I couldn't be angry. All I could do was go to him with flowers at the cemetery. I'd rather have been angry than to have him gone and never get to tell him...I love him.

Please let me know how I can help...Please help me to keep other mothers from hurting from such needless deaths...Please, I'd like to talk to people, to young school kids, to anybody...I need to do something. I miss my son.

There are so many why's. Why a mother must lose a son. Why a child feels the need to take a poison that can destroy mind and body and life. Why this pain has to go on.

We know some of the answers.

We know that drugs are readily available in this country. And no matter how tightly we board up our windows and doors, drugs would still get through. They travel at gale force, beating their way in wherever there is demand. Yet although availability is an important factor, it doesn't really explain why young people use drugs.

We also know that peer pressure has a great deal to do with drug use. Young people don't want to be left out; they want to belong; they want to be accepted; they want friends and good times. Sometimes they think this means using drugs. Fortunately, there are positive peer pressure groups forming, such as the Just Say No Clubs, which are countering the pressure to use drugs. Still, like availability, peer pressure doesn't fully explain why either.

We also know that for many years drugs were glamorized on television, in the movies and on records. They were joked about by comedians and sung about by rock groups. Thankfully, glamorization is decreasing. While the use of alcohol is still much too prevalent on TV, on the whole TV is now an ally to our cause rather than an enemy. The incidence of gratuitous drug jokes and references in the movies is declining. There is still some denial in the record industry.

But I could list a number of factors that contribute to our young people taking drugs--academic pressures, boredom, normal adolescent rebellion and so on, but let me raise something that I think is much more basic than anything I've mentioned this evening. Self-esteem, or more correctly, the lack of it.

The lack of self-esteem is an open door to drugs. And the presence of self-esteem is the best barricade against them.

You know someone was once sitting next to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at an educational conference. And a woman had just presented a paper entitled, "First Teach Them To Read." Dr. King leaned over and said, "First, teach them to believe in themselves."

I think that's the key. I believe drugs rush in to fill the void where a child's supply of self-esteem should be. The consequences of that void are greater today than ever before in history. Other eras have had their own means

of escape. Alcohol, which is also a drug, comes immediately to mind. The danger today is that with something like crack addiction can be almost instantaneous. The stakes of experimentation and searching for oneself have been greatly increased.

I was once on a TV show that involved audience participation. A teenage girl put her hand up and said, "No one can possibly understand the pressures kids live under today with tests and sex and everything else." And I said something and we went on to other questions, but I felt I hadn't really given a good answer, so I went back to her and in effect said, "Look, you're going to have pressures your entire life, and the only thing that changes is that they get worse. If you don't learn how to handle them when you're young, you really will be in trouble when you get older. You have to learn to cope."

My mother had a saying, "Little children, little problems--big children, big problems." And that is still true, except that many little children today have big problems in the form of drugs. Here they are trying to defend themselves against drug abuse, a problem even many adults can't handle.

I believe self-esteem gives children the strength to cope, not just with cocaine or alcohol, but with life itself? They get this essential quality from us. If we read to them, talk to them, play and work with them, we'll

be affirming their value as individuals. Our presence will tell them they have worth.

They'll respond naturally. They'll grow in self-confidence and self-esteem and in the process build an internal defense against the seduction of drugs.

All the statistics, all the medical reports, all the horror stories in the world will not keep our children from drugs. But what will keep children from drugs is faith --faith in themselves and in those who love them. And to many of us, that means a faith in God as well.

I believe that whatever destroys faith is evil, and that's what drugs do and that's what drugs are. They destroy everything that you as alumni of this school value as a result of your training and your beliefs.

Drugs are contrary to everything a university represents. A university opens the world to the young; drugs close it. A university stimulates the mind; drugs deaden it. A university furthers aspirations; drugs kill them. A university believes in the betterment of human life; drugs believe in the degradation of life.

Cardinal Gibbons believed in young people and in their potential, or he could never have founded a school such as this. I have no doubt that, if he were alive today, those same beliefs would cause him to be active in the fight against drug abuse. In his memory, and in the spirit of his beliefs, I very gratefully accept this honor. And I pledge

to you I will continue to work with the determination and faith that Cardinal Gibbons would have expected.

In the words of one Father Andrew, "I do not pretend to see light, but I do see gleams and I know I am right to follow those gleams."

Thank you for your encouragement.