June 2, 2013
Good Morning Council. Wow. I may have just said that for the last time. As hard as that may be for me to believe, the real unbelievable story is the tremendous fortune I have had in my career – serving as a teacher, union leader, union staff and CTA Executive Director.

I have said many times, it is an honor and privilege to be your executive director and I mean that from the bottom of my heart. I have the best job in the world. A job, this small town girl would have never dreamed possible.

I always knew I wanted to be a teacher like my mom and my grandmother, but being able to mix my passion for teaching and learning with fighting for the rights of educators and middle class workers, organizing…and POLITICAL ACTION.

This is the greatest job ever! In reading old copies of CTA’s Sierra Education News, I saw a quote the other day that said, “Fear not that your life may have an ending, but rather it may never have a beginning.” Well, thanks to the students I’ve taught over the years, the educators and union leaders I’ve worked and grown with, and the love and support of my husband and family…I’ve had a tremendous beginning.

Rather than the usual Sunday morning speech, today, I just want to share a few thoughts, reflections and “key learnings” from the last 46 years. There have been many actions and events that I am proud to have been part of and that have left lasting impressions on my life.

Getting my first teaching job in Willits. Moving to Alaska and getting to teach high schoolers. Starting a school-within-a-school at West Anchorage High. We had 200 kids: English learners, drop-out kids, problem kids – and created a special school that focused on their needs and built on their strengths. The program was recognized as outstanding by the state of Alaska.

Becoming the president of the Anchorage Burrough Education Association and NEA-Alaska. My NEA family means the world to me. It’s where I learned the skills that brought me here today. Moving back to California and working with San Francisco CTA…but being even happier when after years of representational battles – some I won, some I lost – that in 1989 SFCTA and SFFT merged and became the United Educators of San Francisco.

Another highlight of mine in San Francisco was the transformation of the old Hawthorne Elementary school. The school was rundown, unsafe and just a toxic place for students and educators. But we organized the members, changed the culture, got rid of the principal and made the school a safe, inviting place for learning. We also changed the name to Cesar Chavez Elementary to reflect the diversity of the area.

I will always consider San Francisco home…not to mention the home of the 2010 and 2012 World Series Champions! Giants rule…Dodgers drool!

I became part of the CTA management team in 1992 when my boss Ralph Flynn called me and told me to report to the headquarters in Burlingame. Upon his death, I became the first woman CTA Executive
Director. I’ll be honest, I was pretty scared. But I think of the words of my hero, Eleanor Roosevelt...and it is advice that I share with all of you: “Do one thing every day that scares you.”

As Executive Director I have been part of an incredible team of leaders and staff. And there are a few things I’m most proud of: Our 1995 “Don’t Crowd Our Kids” campaign that ended with the passage of the state’s Class Size Reduction law for our lowest grades.

I know the law has been impacted by state budget cuts, we’ve had to fight several times to protect it, and it still needs to be expanded, but these are battles worth having. We have sponsored legislation on class size reduction this year. We’ve killed school vouchers twice. Soundly defeating these attempts to dismantle public schools and shift money to private schools.

We’ve beaten paycheck deception three times, including the first ever attempt in the country in 1998; in 2005 when we terminated the Terminator and killed three bad initiatives aimed at undermining the power of CTA; and again last year.

I’m proud of working with former CTA President Barbara Kerr to establish the Quality Education Investment Act. The Board spent hours debating how to use the one-time dollars from the lawsuit we won when we proved Schwarzenegger broke his promise to schools. The question was: do we give a little money to every school or do we target the resources to help those with the most need? The Board made the absolute right decision. And as Dean said, that program is now touted internationally as an example of how one union is leading education reform.

I’m so proud of getting CTA’s Institute for Teaching off the ground. Our teacher-driven reforms and our strength-based focus are critical to our success.

And last year’s campaign to pass Prop. 30 and defeat Prop 32 was one of the toughest CTA has fought. I still pinch myself and say did we really do that? And by god, YES WE DID!

The news media call CTA “powerful,” the “800 pound gorilla” and the “relentless political machine.” I proudly wear those terms as a badge of courage. They speak to the strength of this organization, the power of collective action and the tenacity of teachers.

As part of the Strategic Planning Process, one committee interviewed reporters and asked them why these descriptions are always used. The reporters matter-of-factly responded: It’s because you are powerful. You have the power of educators across the state. You speak for students, schools and educators.

You are good at what you do...and you never lose. You say what you are going to do and then you have the smarts, the track record and the money to back it up. You are successful. To that I say...AMEN! Thanks to all of you, and our incredible CTA staff and managers...we ARE the POWERFUL California Teachers Association...and I’m proud of it.

Lastly and most importantly...because it is at the center of all that we do...engaging with our members has been critical and a real delight for me. Speaking at Rep Councils, visiting schools, and talking with educators in lunchrooms, on playgrounds and in classrooms has kept me grounded. Being Executive Director is always about our members, about our schools and about the students in those schools.

Every year, as I presented to the Budget Committee, I started with a simple question. How will the budget decisions impact our members in a positive way so they can do the job with the students they teach? What’s best for our students is what’s best for educators?
When I reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of CTA, a few things come to mind. First, foremost and always, our members are our greatest strength. We have, from our inception 150 years ago, always been willing to deal with the tough educational and social issues.

I’ve mentioned some of them already, but I also think about supporting bilingual education, standing up for marriage equality and protecting the rights of women with regard to health issues and our right to choose what happens with our bodies.

As Dean said yesterday, leading isn’t always easy, but it’s the right thing to do. Diversity in CTA’s workforce is critical to being a strong CTA. And when I say diversity, I mean a mix of colors, ethnicities and genders, but also a mix of minds and opinions. And finally, I believe one of the significant strengths of CTA is our leadership and staffing structure.

Our leaders have the time to be educational and political leaders, while staff implements the policies and programs. A strong CTA is that three legged stool: members, leaders and staff. When it comes to weaknesses, I have only one. We tend to have multiple top priorities all the time and spread ourselves a little too thin.

I’ve heard that retired people make a lot of lists. So I’m getting a head start and I have one more. You know how David Letterman has his top 10 list. This is my Top 10 list of Key Learnings:

10. Keep an open mind. There are always two sides to most issues.
9. Listen, listen, listen.
8. Bad news doesn’t improve with age...so it’s always best to deal with issues as they arise.
7. Look for the best in people.
6. Flexibility is critical to moving forward.
5. Always keep your values and a sense a humor intact.
4. Passion is important. People can learn skills, but it is hard to teach them passion.
3. Integrity is critical.
2. Teams win, not individuals. We are all in this together.

And the number one Key Learning: Even when faced with seemingly impossible odds, it is important to take a deep breath and say, “This is doable. We can do this!”

Finally, I want to leave you today with something that I have talked about often. And that’s how one person, one vote, one action makes a difference. I again turn to a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt.

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet, they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless the rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world. The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”
Thank you very much council…and ladies remember: Well behaved women rarely make history. Go make history!