

Acceptance of Dr. Paul Cornely Award for Social Activism from the Physicians' Forum at the American Public Health Association, Nov. 7, 2010  
by Ellen R Shaffer, PhD MPH, Co-Director, EQUAL Health Network

Thank you so much for this award. It is a deep honor to carry on the historic and inspiring work of Dr. Paul Cornely, a lifelong fighter for social justice. Upon his death in 2002, the Washington Post recalled his outstanding lifetime in public health. He was the first black president of the American Public Health Association (1970), the first black person to earn a doctorate in public health (1934), and a founder and first president of the D.C. Public Health Association in 1963 (now the Metropolitan Washington Public Health Association.) Among his landmark struggles was the fight to eliminate segregated health care.

It is especially meaningful to celebrate the traditions those of us gathered together tonight share.

The APHA annual meeting usually follows just on our national elections, and as a result we've shared many historic moments together.

We were together on the eve of the Bush presidency in 2000, and again when we led him to fire Donald Rumsfeld in 2006.

We were together when we elected Barack Obama in 2008

And this week, of course, the San Francisco Giants have won the World Series for first time in decades - against the Texas Rangers, I might add.

It has been a difficult week in some other respects but we are so lucky in so many ways - that we do still have the motivation, the means and the wherewithal to speak up for what we believe in.

And especially that we have each other to come together and share it with.

The corporate assault on politics is not new.

There are real historians here so I'll just talk from two of my personal sources of information - my parents and the movies.

I remember my parents telling me about Glenn Beck's precursor, the hate-spewing Father Coughlin, an anti-Semitic, pro Nazi demagogue who dominated the radio airwaves in the 1930s.

And I've been watching re-runs lately of "Mr Smith Goes to Washington." Freshly minted Senator Jimmy Stewart tries to stop a local wheeler dealer from diverting federal funds to build a dam on his property. Jimmy Stewart did everything he could muster. He filibustered on the floor of the Senate to marshal the local press back home - Mr Big confiscated all the newspapers and paid off the radio announcers. Jimmy mobilized the Boy Scouts to hand out fliers, and Mr. Big's goons beat up the Boy Scouts! But he kept at

it and kept at it, til Senator Claude Rains couldn't take it any more and handed Jimmy his victory.

Their techniques are more sophisticated today. But the goal is always the same - to keep us ignorant and quiet, so the bullies of the world can get their way.

I think we've had more than one victory this year. We passed health care reform, after a century of failure. It is pock-marked, bullet-ridden and precarious, but it does two things at the heart of the single payer system we are going to win:

It expands the role of government in assuring coverage and payment for health care - something we must start talking about, positively and effectively.

And it targets administrative waste and reform of the delivery system.

These fundamental reforms are in addition to the immediate benefits I hear about every day, in the work of the EQUAL Health Network to educate about, implement and improve the new law, the immediate reason for this honor tonight.

Nothing could give me greater pleasure than to have the chance to share this room with the many of you who've stood here before me, and forged our identity as people who will speak truth to power - and will bend it!