Women’s March on Denver
Comments of Denver City Councilwoman Robin Kniech:
Leading from our Strengths
(Delivered January 21, 2017 - edited and expanded for print publication)

Hello Colorado!

I’m standing here today as an elected official because of the women’s movement. I learned everything from lobbying to running a press conference as a pro-choice college activist. Working with domestic violence and sexual assault survivors motivated me to go to law school. Working with and for women helped shape me into the leader I am today – where I work on issues that disproportionately impact women, but touch everyone in our community - like reducing poverty and expanding affordable housing.

So let’s talk about leadership.

I’m a believer in a very old adage with a bit of a twist. It used to go like this “Behind every great man, there is a great woman.” But here’s how I like to think about it:

Behind every great woman, there are many other great women. Sometimes we know these women. A mom who inspired or showed us how to be strong. A woman who taught us, hired us, promoted us, or mentored us. The child care providers who take care of our children while we run businesses, organizations, or governments.

I want us all to pause for a moment – men too -- and think about a woman we know, who shaped us, supported us or made our leadership possible. Let’s honor those women by saying their names out loud. (Grandma Nicky)

And let’s honor the women we don’t know personally. The women who changed the arc of history so it would be legal for us to vote and run for office. The first female doctors or scientists or engineers. The women who were injured or died during the civil rights movement so African Americans could walk through the doors of opportunity later.
History books don’t always write their stories or names. But if you can think of the name of a woman you never met, who paved the way for you, maybe even before you were born, let’s honor them too. (Elizabeth Piper Ensley)

Now that we’ve honored the past, the question is: what does it mean to lead in the world we find ourselves in today, going forward?

We face real and serious threats. But we aren’t underdogs. We are strong. Many of the laws of this land are on our side, like the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. And look around us – we are many. We are already leaders. And we can lead from our strengths.

Let’s start with personal leadership. Because our foremothers taught us, for women especially, the personal is political.

1) For me – this begins with being my authentic self. I’m a lesbian, and I’m out. The folks I work with – whether it’s on transportation or trash – pastors or park rangers --- they know that I’m gay. I might be the only lesbian they know. By being who I am, I believe that in small ways I am opening hearts and minds. The vulnerability of gay and lesbian folks telling our true stories changed the hearts and minds that made gay marriage the law of this land. Whether you are a survivor of sexual abuse, of racial discrimination, or someone who relies on health care law to ensure coverage of pre-existing conditions - we have to tell our stories. We are strong when we lead from our true selves.

2) I’m also a mom. Parenting is leadership, every day. It’s sleep deprivation and leadership. This year parents talked a lot with daughters, leading them to understand they can be anything they want to be. We have to keep encouraging our daughters to lead, and fostering their strengths.

And sons. If the last year has taught us anything it is that we need to be talking a lot with boys and young men about women. About respect for women, their bodies, about preventing sexual assault. And about girls and women as equals in all roles.

3) And finally, I’m going to get real personal here. I am a white woman. We are in a very scary time. Racial intolerance persists in our country. And we have lots of political work to do to fight oppression against black and brown communities, to protect civil rights, promote inclusivity. But I’m here to say we have some
personal work to do too. To lead as a white person – anywhere, in our families or our neighborhoods or our workplaces -- requires exploring our own privileges we didn’t earn, like driving around without ever getting pulled over. And it requires speaking up about race, in those small uncomfortable conversations with friends and family, and in bigger, public spheres. And standing in solidarity with and fostering the leadership of people of color. We are just days past celebrating Martin Luther King’s legacy, and I renew my vows to doing this personal work.  

**And then we Need Community and Political Leadership Too:**

**Run for Office**

A few of us here today had high hopes for a woman president. But women presidents don’t drop from the sky. They are most likely to come from female governors or senators, and those folks might come from state legislatures or city councils or school boards. So think about running. Encourage other women to run.

**Vote**

But those women don’t elect themselves. Fewer than 1 in 4 voters voted in the year I was elected. We need to join together in a commitment to vote in *every election*, sometimes that means twice in a single year, including school boards and city elections. Vote for those who stand against violence and hate, and for those who stand for social and economic equity for those who struggle in our communities.

**Stand in Solidarity**

The economy of our city would fall apart without the contributions of our immigrant neighbors. Their families would be devastated by regressive immigration policies. We have the strength to resist anti-immigrant attacks. We need to raise our voices that we welcome our immigrant neighbors. And when cities like Denver and Boulder stand up and say that we will not enforce federal immigration laws, that we will protect and serve all our residents, including our immigrant residents – stand with us, lend your support.
Resist

Let’s talk about health care: millions of women have health insurance today that is threatened. Every woman with insurance right now has free preventative care and mammogram screenings, is protected from bias, has access to contraception if she needs it. We have the strength to fight to protect women’s health care, to resist irresponsible repeal efforts.

Thank you to the organizers and volunteers of this march. And to each and every one of you.

We aren’t underdogs. We are strong women and we stand on the shoulders of many, many strong women. We are all, already leaders. And we have the strength to lead both the personal and political work it will take to fight any threat that comes. Si Se Puede. We CAN do this.

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Since the Women’s March and a series of divisive federal executive orders, our office has been flooded with requests for more ideas and specifics for how to get involved in promoting values of inclusion and equality. So I’m adding these additional tips:

Do keep writing and calling your elected officials at all level of government. But to be the most effective:

  o Ideally write to the local elected official who has control/influence over your area of concern. For example, local government doesn’t have the power to vote for or against the repeal of the Affordable Care Act. But we do help to fund Denver Health, the safety net hospital in Denver. Try to match your input to the influence they have.
  o Reach out to an organization that is working in the area you care about for training and tips on who the key decision-makers are on a certain vote. You don’t have to start from scratch, they can give you model language too. If you’re not sure who is advocating for something you believe in, contact our office, we can probably help connect you: kniechatlarge@denvergov.org or 720-337-7712
- It is good to communicate when you agree/appreciate with a tough stance someone takes, not just when you disagree. For example, city council often gets opposition to new buildings that serve vulnerable populations, but we are less likely to hear from those who support these services and understand that they are an integral part of our community.

- Include your contact information, you will have the most influence on the elected official if they know you live in their district (many of the post-card campaigns post-march didn’t include a spot for this – just write your address in).

- Be respectful, avoid threats or name-calling.