

Remarks by Bear Atwood '77
2021 John and Elizabeth Phillips Award recipient

Thank you for this tremendous honor. I value being a member of the Exeter community and your recognition means a great deal to me. I particularly want to acknowledge my mother, who is here today. She, along with my father, taught me from an early age to believe in equality and justice and to value education. This award was created in 1965 to honor John and Elizabeth Phillips' ideals of goodness and knowledge. It was a time of political upheaval and fast-paced social change. It wasn't always clear that our democracy would survive. Sound familiar?

Earlier, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial galvanized the civil rights movement and inspired millions. Perhaps this award was part of Exeter's answer to Dr. King's call to action. He certainly inspired me.

And this past August, I found myself giving a speech of my own at the Lincoln Memorial. As you might imagine, it was a stirring and profound experience to stand where Dr. King had stood, and to speak truth to power. It was also pretty cool.

I was speaking at the Make Good Trouble Rally, convened in the spirit of the late John Lewis and the first March on Washington. Along with urging us to, "make some noise and get in good trouble," John Lewis told us, "do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic."

John Lewis didn't learn that lesson from Exeter, but he could have. I heard it clearly enough to lead me throughout my career and life as an activist. It brought me to speak with purpose and passion at the Lincoln Memorial, and it's brought me here today, to receive this award.

As I was speaking where Dr. King had spoken, the realization also weighed down on me that 58 years since Martin Luther King was standing where I stood, we're still talking about the same things. We're still fighting the same fights. That's because we're facing the same threats—and they're more pernicious than ever.

It's a good thing Exeter taught me how to be persistent, and dedicated, and strategic.

The right to vote has always been hard fought, and even the 19th Amendment's promise of suffrage for women failed to provide access to the ballot box for Black women, nor did it include nationwide suffrage for indigenous women. It wasn't until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that discriminatory voting practices were outlawed—but the outlaws came out on top when the Supreme Court's *Shelby County* decision gutted the pre-clearance provision of the Voting Rights Act and made it easier for certain states to go back to their racist ways.

This week, Senate Republicans blocked passage of the Freedom to Vote Act (Probably as of this writing!) but we still need to pass voting rights laws that achieve the promise of a truly inclusive America.

My organization, along with coalition partners and our grassroots chapters and activists, is defending the existential threat to democracy and voting rights. We're training a new generation of political activists, campaign professionals and future leaders, and expanding our work to engage more young people in politics and voting. As NOW icon Rep. Shirley Chisholm used to say, "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."

Sometimes, this process starts with a new way of seeing—seeing the connections and intersections we experience in our lives, and in society. I was lucky enough to learn much of that at Exeter.

It was while at Exeter that I really become politically engaged. I had always been passionate about social justice, but political action was a good way to focus that passion. It was the year of the 1976 New Hampshire primaries. Carter and Reagan both came to campus, and politics seemed to be all anyone talked about. And, although it was not a lesson they intended to teach, being at Exeter in the early years of girl students certainly helped forge my identification as a radical feminist. I learned at Exeter that if you want to act on your most deeply held values and beliefs, nothing has to stand in your way. And so, while I was standing on those Lincoln Memorial steps, and contemplating just how *long* that arc of history can feel as it bends towards justice... I felt that I was exactly where I belonged. Where I needed to be.

As an officer of NOW, the country's leading grassroots feminist organization, founded more than 50 years ago to defend women's rights at the highest levels of government, law and society, I belonged on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, or at the Supreme Court, where I spoke a few days later with the ERA Coalition to demand constitutional equality. I needed to be there for very personal reasons too. Not just because of a position I hold, but because of the views I hold dear. These are the views that were partially forged at Exeter when I was taught to ask questions, think about profound problems and look for ways to make a difference. You start to expect you'll take on the big fights and make a difference. It's no big deal. It's who you are. Thank you, Exeter.

When I was speaking from the steps of the Supreme Court, I took note of the words carved in stone above me: "Equal Justice Under Law." I'm struck every time I read those words—written by a slaveholder--by how far we remain from that ideal. Our democracy is being hijacked by voter restriction techniques that disproportionately impact young people, the elderly, low-income individuals and especially people of color—and within each of these communities, women are most harshly affected. It's an outrage that women, who fought so hard for suffrage and particularly women of color, who were the last to secure that right, could now be the first to lose it. The result is that women are being kept from voting on the issues that matter most to them—like equal pay for equal work, access to reproductive care, gender equality and racial justice.

All these issues are about rights. Basic, fundamental, inarguable, bloody-well-about-time rights. Voting rights. Civil rights. Women's rights. LGBTQIA+ rights. They're all connected. Ours is an intersectional struggle. If you suppress the voting rights of one part of the population it's only a matter of time before the next group is targeted. If democracy dies for some of us, it dies for us all.

We all need to learn how to watch for the signs that democracy is in peril, but also how to show what's happening to others, some of whom may not have been exposed to the same kind of critical thinking you are used to. A poll taken last fall of Gen Z respondents asked what they viewed as the biggest issue currently facing the world. 35 percent answered the pandemic or health care in general, while 18 percent listed racism, social injustice or another form of discrimination. 16 percent fell into a category the poll called "human fallibility," or as one respondent put it, "the absence of an agreed upon moral or ethical compass in our culture."

At Exeter, I thrived in an environment where you were expected to push back, ask questions and hold true to moral and ethical ideals. This award, forged in the crucible of those ideals, honors the values I learned from Exeter, so thank you for this honor, and thank you as well for everything else.