

Raymonde Charles's Remarks in Honor of Elizabeth Burke Bryant

March 15, 2023

Good evening, everyone. I am humbled and deeply grateful to have this opportunity to honor Elizabeth. Without a doubt, Rhode Island is better because of Elizabeth's tireless work on behalf of children and families. I am also one of those Rhode Islanders whose life is better because of Elizabeth.

I got hired to work at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT right out of high school. That pivotal event changed the course of my life. While I will never fully understand why Elizabeth decided to take a chance on me, I will forever be grateful she did because I gained so much more than an employment opportunity. I also gained a mentor, coach, college advisor, and confidant.

I attended college part-time while I worked at RI KIDS COUNT. My work schedule changed from semester to semester to accommodate my courses. But the constant changes did not prevent Elizabeth from investing in my professional development. She helped me grow from an intern to a program assistant and communications coordinator.

I had never considered a career in communications. I have Elizabeth's coaching to thank for my career today. When the communications coordinator position opened at RI KIDS COUNT, Elizabeth asked me if I was interested. I shared with her that I was interested, but I told her I did not think I was qualified for the role because imposter syndrome is real. Elizabeth helped me to see how my experience aligned with the skills needed for the position and encouraged me to apply. Today, I have more than 20 years of experience driving all facets of communications strategy and campaigns in the public and private sectors, including political campaigns, philanthropy, government, and non-profit

organizations. It all started with that gentle push from Elizabeth. I have stood on her shoulders in every role I have had.

My performance reviews at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT consisted of two parts. We would first review my performance at work and then discuss the progress I was making in my college courses. In one review, I shared with Elizabeth and Cathie I was considering taking a semester off, changing my major to nursing, and switching schools. I will always remember their response. They said, "We have already purchased outfits for your graduation, and we intend to wear them." As you might have guessed, Elizabeth was at my college graduation not long after that conversation, cheering for me.

After graduation, she supported my dream of working on the Hill. She helped me become the press assistant and grant coordinator for Congressman Cicilline. Once in DC, I lived in Maryland with relatives while looking for an apartment. It was the very first time I had to look for an apartment. I had no idea what I was doing, and my exasperation with the search process made me homesick. During a trip to DC, Elizabeth took me to dinner and spent the rest of the evening walking up and down the streets of DC, helping me to look for apartments.

A few years later, when I received the opportunity to work on President Obama's 2012 campaign in Ohio, Elizabeth was instrumental in ensuring I had the best experience possible. The campaign informed me it was the first time they were grilled during a reference check. After speaking with Elizabeth, they wondered if they had passed their interview. Elizabeth had asked them if they would pay me a living wage, if they had the funds to pay me through the end of the campaign, and if they would provide supporter housing. She also asked how they would support me after the campaign. In short, she did everything she could to ensure that I was making a good career move.

There are many more stories I could share about how Elizabeth has shown up for me over and over again. For example, Elizabeth was there when I had to renew my working papers annually while waiting for a green card. Elizabeth was there when there was an earthquake in Haiti, killing and injuring millions. I may be up here speaking today, but I know every person who has worked at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT has similar stories of how Elizabeth made them feel seen, heard, and valued.

To conclude, I thank God for blessing me with Elizabeth Burke Bryant. Everyone deserves an "EBB." Her presence in my life made it better.

I want to thank Eliza, Ben, and Dan for sharing Elizabeth with me all these years.

I want to thank Elizabeth for being generous with her time, expertise, faith, and love. Elizabeth, I owe you a debt of gratitude; I can never repay you. My goal is to pay it forward. I have dedicated my career to pursuing social justice because of you. I love you very much, more than I could ever express. Thank you. Thank you for being so instrumental in my success. Thank you for being with me every step of the way.