

Text of Scott Wolf's Acceptance Speech for RI Community Service Award at Leadership Rhode Island's Inspiring Leaders Awards Luncheon, March 16, 2017

(Much of Scott's considerable adlibbing not included here, but available in video of his remarks that will be available soon)

THANKS AND GRATITUDE

Jane, thanks much for your warm introduction and for being such a fearless and effective civic leader--- and a great summer neighbor for many years.

Praise and recognition of course are always nice but receiving this award today from such a dynamic, cutting edge and high impact group as LRI is very special and gratifying.

I love RI even though, I'm sure as is the case with many of you, I'm frustrated by it sometimes. But this state has been very good to me. It's provided me with a fascinating, fulfilling and spiritually rich journey, along with wonderful friends, professional colleagues and role models. That's why it's especially heartening to know that Leadership RI thinks I've paid something back to the state.

One of the many strengths of LRI is its recognition that It not only takes a village to raise a child, but also to nurture and sustain leaders. I am convinced nobody becomes a constructive leader without having good role models and good support.

But under the dynamic and visionary leadership of Mike Ritz and his crack team, LRI is supplementing its critical and longstanding mission of training a new generation of leaders by working to elevate Rhode Islanders' collective self-esteem and to break down such growth inhibiting barriers among us as geography, race, class, and political affiliation. These are the kinds of systemic change efforts that my organization Grow Smart RI also pursues in our own distinctive way because we believe that they are essential to produce enduring progress and sustainable economic growth for RI rather than just narrow advancement in fits and starts.

In addition to LRI I want to also express gratitude today for my outstanding Grow Smart RI Staff, Board, and community partners, as well as my late, incredible parents and role models , Irving and Ruth Wolf. They instilled in me a passion both for community service and Rhode Island, Finally a special message of gratitude to my exceptional wife Joyce Krabach, who has always encouraged me, even pushed me to pursue my dreams, no matter how far they might lead us away from a life of potential leisure and luxury.

I also want to congratulate the other impressive award recipients and let you know how pleased I am to be sharing this inspiring and energizing day with each of you.

MAIN FOCUS

My main focus for the rest of my remarks is how can we make RI an even better place in which to live, work, play and visit.

I want to talk with you briefly about two ways to do this, beyond of course continuing to support the cutting edge efforts of LRI.

One way to strengthen Rhode Island in an enduring way is by recommitting ourselves in these tumultuous times to a brand of leadership that is inclusive, solution oriented, constructive, and respectful of research and facts.

And a second way to move our state forward is to better understand and communicate RI's strengths, opportunities and recent progress-- as well as its continuing challenges.

ACHIEVING A CRITICAL MASS OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Achieving a critical mass of the brand of effective leadership that I have described is a more important goal than ever but also more elusive than ever for several reasons. One is the destabilizing influences of technological advancement. The other is that polarizing people seems to be a winning political strategy today both nationally and in many individual states. A stark and stubborn truth is that appealing to the worst in people is easier than appealing to their best impulses, something history unfortunately has borne out. Fortunately this substitution of demagoguery for thoughtful discussion is happening much less often in RI than in many other places, but we need to be vigilant to prevent ourselves from sliding down this slippery slope.

The irony of the current political scene is that our civic realm seems to be getting dumbed down even as we grow more technologically sophisticated. We have 24-7 access on the internet and electronic media to so called breaking news, but shrinking access to in-depth analysis of that news, partially because of print media's reduced resources, and partially because of our collective reduced attention spans. For all of us seeking to exert constructive leadership this places a premium on providing some perspective and analysis about the key issues facing us.

As civic leaders we need to give the public a better ability to know when they are being conned and led astray by false leaders and false prophets peddling conspiracy theories and urban legends that have little if any basis in fact.

The ubiquity of information technology has another unfortunate consequence—pushing us to be reactive rather than proactive. I for example have to force myself to step back some time from the onslaught of e-mails, texts and tweets to gain perspective and engage in something beyond superficial analysis of the issues I'm trying to influence. I'm sure this is the case for many of you as well.

With rabble rousing often marginalizing thoughtful, research based analysis, there is an urgent question we all need to be asking our associates, the media and anyone else we can influence:

- And that is: Is the leadership model that is best for our community focused on listening or on shouting, on bringing disparate groups together or on deliberately dividing them, on expanding freedom or on narrowing it?

BETTER UNDERSTANDING RI'S STRENGTHS, OPPORTUNITIES AND RECENT PROGRESS AS WELL AS ITS CONTINUING CHALLENGES

Hopefully RI can continue to be a much less polarizing and more thoughtful place than many other states, but to achieve our still vast untapped potential we also need to work more on a chronic problem Grow Smart RI has been seeking to address for the last decade – that is the state's collective low self-esteem and knee jerk negativity. Sometimes we in RI can be our own worst enemies through excessive cynicism and the low expectations for our leaders that flow from that mind set.

This is not to say that RI is without serious flaws, serious challenges and serious unforced errors. I want to assure you that I am a Wolf, not an Ostrich. But I am advocating for a more balanced and more realistic view of our state, one that acknowledges and celebrates our many assets and opportunities too, and gives due deference to our many noteworthy accomplishments. Here's just a representative sample of these accomplishments:

- Moving rivers, train tracks and highways to create an urban renaissance admired and studied by people all over the world
- One of the most dramatic unemployment rate decreases over the last several years of any state in America
- The attraction of branches of several large international companies to Providence within the last two years, duly noted earlier this week in the *New York Times*
- Our recent ranking by *US News and World Report* as the second best state in America for attracting young adults in the 25-29 year old age bracket.
- Major investments during the past 15 years in preserving and rehabbing our nationally renowned collection of historic buildings and neighborhoods
- National accolades for our world class beauty, food and art scenes, and our incredible architecture.
- A dramatically cleaner Narragansett Bay resulting from major public investments in combatting the Combined Sewer Overflow problem.
- One of the lowest rates of people lacking health insurance of any state in America and one of the highest state rankings for energy efficiency.
- An uptick in the number of farms in Rhode Island, a positive trend that strengthens our outstanding, albeit still fragile urban rural balance

- Dramatic recent improvements in worker motivation recorded by Gallup and produced largely by a bold Gallup/ LRI partnership to help individual Rhode Islanders and RI employers appreciate workers' strengths.
- And pioneering efforts to develop offshore wind energy facilities and create a knowledge base for developing cutting edge resiliency strategies to adapt to climate change.

These impressive advances need to be given at least as much attention as our still too frequent missteps on such issues as continued political corruption and state computer problems. And when we hear about these continued failings and errors, we need to resist the urge to conclude that all of this is a part of an “Only in Rhode Island “phenomenon.

In fact I am here today to make a provocative statement: Although RI is distinctive, beautiful, quirky intimate, and blessedly diverse, culturally geographically and demographically, we are, for the most part, not unique in the problems we have or in our imperfect way of dealing with them.

We don't have a monopoly for instance on political corruption as evidenced by that fact that we didn't even make a list compiled by *Fortune Magazine* of the ten most politically corrupt states in America. And as disturbing and aggravating as RI's recent problems have been in establishing a new computer system for recipients of government assistance , my recent 15 minute google search revealed five other states with similar problems ranging from California, Wisconsin and Tennessee to Louisiana and Illinois.

So this is why I believe the mantra of “Only in RI” is overused and frequently inaccurate .Why does this matter? Because thinking that we are uniquely incompetent, corrupt and shortsighted sets up an unnecessary level of fatalism, cynicism, and easy excuses for disengagement .

As we progress on many fronts and realize that on the fronts where we are falling short we have plenty of company elsewhere, it's time for us to transcend the RI syndrome of “Only in RI” and “Uniquetitis” . If we can't get beyond this self-limiting mind set, we could get stuck in a default posture of timidity vs. research based boldness, a posture that will ultimately lock in mediocrity rather than opening the door to high achievement.

To use our talent and resources wisely in solving RI's most important remaining systemic problems we also have to unmask some urban legends that create false challenges and bogeymen. These legends flourish in an atmosphere of knee jerk negativity and Uniquetitis. And there are many of them in RI .Two bother me the most though:

1. That Rhode Islanders are overburdened by our sales tax system. The facts, produced by RIPEC in their annual study of how RI's tax burdens compare to other states, are that Rhode Islanders actually pay less per capita than the national average in annual sales tax .This is mainly because our high sales tax rate is applied narrowly, with many staples of everyday life such as food and clothing, largely exempted from the tax. The aspect of our tax system that does place us as somewhat of a national, if not New England outlier, is

our property tax. So let's focus on bringing that down rather than expending energy on an aspect of our tax system in which we are already quite competitive.

2. The second urban legend I want to debunk is that we are a welfare magnet because of our allegedly high welfare payment structure. The facts once again don't bear this out. In fact, RI's monthly cash assistance benefit is the second lowest of the six New England states based on data compiled by the Economic Progress Institute.

At Grow Smart RI we are urging the state's leaders and citizens not to be diverted and distracted by these urban legends but instead to concentrate on tackling such opportunities as reinvesting in our nationally renowned State Historic Tax Credit program, developing a master plan for a more user friendly, dynamic and integrated public transportation system, reforming local zoning rules to make it easier for farmers and forest owners to prosper, and adopting a version of Massachusetts's highly successful Mass Works program that makes competitive grants available to municipalities for infrastructure improvements critical to urban and town center revitalization. We also think that RI's competitiveness can be enhanced greatly if we continue to embrace newcomers whether they are from Baltimore or Bogota, New York or Nigeria. These folks have the fresh perspectives and drive we need to grow our population and economy—and to keep our state culturally dynamic and on the cutting edge of innovation.

CONCLUSION

I want to leave you today with a message of hope and a peaceful call to arms.

I believe that Rhode Island is turning a corner and moving in a much more positive direction economically and at the neighborhood revitalization level. To accelerate these positive trends we need to keep identifying and playing to our strengths as well as having the courage to confront our weaknesses--- but without exaggerating them or being paralyzed by them. This is a delicate balance that RI has had a hard time achieving in the recent past but that I think we're getting better at now, and we need to continue to progress on this front.

I'm convinced big breakthroughs are within our grasp if we remain committed to this positive course of action.

So let's share with others the pure joy and exhilaration of community leadership and problem solving.

And let's use our leadership opportunities and platforms to instill passion, focus and commitment but not dogmatism or intransigence

Thanks so much for believing in RI and in the value of constructive leadership and for honoring me today in such a generous and meaningful way.

