

May 4, 2011 | Washington, DC, Renaissance Hotel | Gov. Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr.

**Remarks to the Arab American Institute's Kahil Gibran "Spirit of Humanity" Awards Gala upon receiving the Najeeb Halaby Award for Public Service**

---

*Transcribed from extemporaneous remarks*

Leave it to my old pals, Jim and John and George to pick absolutely the perfect person. There is no one I would rather be brought here to this podium by than Ray LaHood. Everyone here, including me, should be very grateful for my pathetically poor powers of persuasion. Because if I was any good at it, I would have talked Ray LaHood into running for governor of Illinois. Our state would have a lot tougher competitor west, but America would be deprived of a spectacularly good secretary of transportation.

[applause]

You all are lucky that I was not able to talk you into that. You would have been as great at that job as you have been at all the other capacities in which you've served America, and we're immensely grateful to you.

I want to thank everyone present for affording me this wonderful night of pride and memories of my family and those who have made my life possible. I love the story of our family, but there is no reason any of you should be particularly interested in it. There is nothing at all remarkable about the Daniels family heritage, except that it has happened millions of times in America and is very typical of the opportunities and promise and lives that this blessed land has enabled.

The young man named Elias Essa Daniels -- Daniels was actually added at Ellis Island -- was born in April 1884. At the age of 21, like millions before and after him, he was summoned to the promised land that he had heard so much about. In 1905 he came to this country. He came here penniless and illiterate. He never got over the second condition, to his last day he never did read or write in English. He got over the first condition. He made a little scratch in a little steel town of Monessen, Pennsylvania.

In this wonderful world in which we live, one of my daughters, fascinated by the story that I had told her, was able to unearth -- through the internet -- his passport application from 1921, when, in February of that year, having gotten a stake together, he went back to the homeland to find a bride. On that passport application he listed his occupation as "pool room." In our family we know that was accurate but incomplete. He omitted to mention that from that pool room he also ran the numbers racket in that part of the state. But, I am sure as a good Syrian, he ran a very honest facility.

So with the money he put together, he went back and found the most beautiful younger woman. Hanna Afifi, Daniels as she became. And my daughters, in the most precious father's day present I've ever received, snuck out during a family trip to Ellis Island and got the passenger manifest

of Elias Essa Daniels and Hanna Afifi Daniels coming to the new world -- coming to America -- and a picture of the Olympic, the ship on which they arrived. It is a treasured possession that hangs on the wall in my den.

Hanna didn't live very long. She perished of an infection we could easily cure today. My dad and uncle barely knew her, but while she was an American she gave birth to two young men who made great lives in this country. My grandfather never forgot her, never remarried; he talked about her to the end of his days. He never forgot Syria either. He and some of my great aunts endowed and funded a hospital, which is still there in the little village of Al-Kalatieh...

[applause]

...at the foot of the famous cross of Krak de Chevaliers near Homs. It is there to this day, and my wife and I intend to be its benefactors for the next generation.

[applause]

These are ever-more precious memories and heritages to me and now to my kids.

Henry Kissinger once said, the best thing about becoming better known was when you bore people they think it's their fault (laughter). I've discovered in the last few months another real advantage to becoming a little better known. A lot of the noise and attention that has happened nationally has led to new connections to my heritage and to my roots, as they say, because there were stories written in the Syrian press about this Homs, someone from the area of Homs, who was rumored about as being a person of some potential interest in American public life. And this led to new correspondence. I got emails from people there who had seen this story and found a way to reach me. It's been a great, great matter to me. I have new pictures; I have new information about the village and potentially some connections to distant family members that we didn't have before.

Recently, however, these new connections have taken on a different, and somewhat ominous, tone. Because as we know, there have been the same stirrings, the same yearning for freedom, that has burst loose elsewhere in the Middle East has come to Syria. And I've now been sending emails, not merely inquiring about family connections or developments in the village, but to make sure everybody's all right and to make sure that everyone is safe.

Now, it's such an interesting night to be together with each of you and to receive this undeserved honor, because as proud as I have always been -- and more so with the passage of the years -- in this heritage that we share, I've never been able to say I am proud of the regime that's been in power for decades in the land from which my people came. But now, I am so proud that brave Syrians have stepped forward as their Egyptian and Tunisian and other counterparts have. And against, apparently, brutal threats and repression have stood up for the right to dream and to live free and to try to pursue better lives for themselves.

[applause]

So I'm just moved to say that the timing of tonight's dinner is just so fortuitous – it feels this way to me – because it doesn't stretch a point to say that the same dreams and the same hopes and the same determination to make a life for himself that brought Elias Essa Daniels to this country -- of which he knew nothing, whose language he did not speak – is alive now in that part of the world, and may have the chance to bring the same sort of wonderful opportunity that he made possible for my father and ultimately for me.

So I just want to say tonight may Syria and all the lands near it soon become places of peace and freedom and self-determination and may this land that has blessed every one of us so richly continue to be an example and a welcoming home to any who seek to pursue those same dreams for themselves.

Thank you for this honor and for this opportunity to be with each of you.