

Governor Phil Murphy

Governor Murphy Speaks at Memorial Service for Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver

08/12/2023

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Good afternoon.

I want to start by thanking God for blessing us with 71 years of the one-and-only Sheila Y. Oliver.

To Ms. Jenny Oliver, to Charles Senior and Silvia, to Charles Jr., Renee, Leah, to Jaxson, Kaylea, Kaari, and Charles the 4th, on behalf of your entire New Jersey family: thank you for raising, supporting, and loving one of the finest public servants our state—and if I may be so bold, our nation—has ever known.

I had a chance to meet with Ms. Oliver and the Oliver family after Sheila's passing.

And what struck me is that, though Sheila was an aunt—and great-aunt—to the young members of her family, in much a realer sense, she was like a mother.

Well, I believe that is true for our entire state.

Sheila loved New Jersey like a mother—and she shared that love with us every single day.

To all of Sheila's family in public service, to Terry Tucker, her Chief of Staff, to the members of her New Jersey State Police protective detail, including—but not limited to—Lieutenant Wascar Payano, Lieutenant Damon Crawford, Sergeant Teyon Hendry,



and Trooper Pierre Noel, to the tremendous team she led at the Department of Community Affairs, to those who worked alongside her in the Legislature and those who served in her district office, and to those in Essex County, East Orange, and Newark with whom she spent countless hours working to improve our state: thank you for helping Sheila shine like the star she was.

And thank you to everyone here today—or tuning in online—for joining us to honor the best partner in government I could ever dream of.

A little more than six years ago, I received the happiest news of my career.

Sheila had agreed to join me on our first campaign together.

And the day I will always remember, in particular, is July 24, 2017.

That was the day we met, for the first time, as running mates.

That evening, Sheila joined me, Tammy, and our kids in Newark's historic Ironbound—to break bread and celebrate the beginning of our journey together.

It was the moment she became an honorary member of the Murphy Family.

And ever since that night, I trusted Sheila at every turn.

I relied on her navigational skills in the legislative maze that is the State House.

I followed her moral compass—to chart a better path forward for all of our state's families.

And, I tried to live up to the gold standard she set every day as the rockin'-est member of our Cabinet.

I mean, just look around this room: Only a rock star like Sheila could headline the fifth-largest Cathedral in all of North America.

And I would like to take this opportunity to thank Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin for sharing this holy ground with us as Sheila lifts up and takes flight as New Jersey's newest guardian angel. Thank you.

Today's ceremony is the capstone to an historic, three-day Celebration of Life. And it is exactly the sendoff Sheila deserves.

On the day Sheila took her first oath of office as Lieutenant Governor—with Ms. Oliver and Charles by her side—she reflected on what it means to make history.

She said, quote, “we make history not in the moment, but in what we do with it.”

Well, that sentiment defines Sheila’s entire life.

She never settled for simply breaking one glass ceiling after another. No. Each time Sheila made history, she dedicated herself to breaking down barriers for everyone else—especially young women of color who share her story.

And while she may have been my second-in-command as Lieutenant Governor, Sheila was nobody’s second fiddle.

Make no mistake about it: She was the first-rate fighter for every New Jerseyan.

But more than anything, Sheila Oliver was the pride and joy of Essex County.

She was a daughter of Newark.

The city where she was born and raised.

The city that—on the eve of her 15th birthday—erupted into flames after years of being neglected, hollowed out, and disregarded by generations of leaders.

Those four days of burning—which we remember as the Newark Rebellion—lit a fire in Sheila’s heart.

It was a communal outcry that inspired her to become the champion she believed her community had never had—but sorely needed.

And in the decades since, Sheila rolled up her sleeves—again and again—and dedicated herself to extinguishing the embers of inequality, injustice, and indigence.

Perhaps nothing better captures Sheila’s political philosophy than something she said during a speech on the Assembly floor in support of marriage equality in 2012.

Sheila said, quote, “I also relish being an American. And something that history has taught me as an American is that democracy, and the ability for all people to equally exist within our democracy, is a right that is guaranteed to us in our Constitution.”

Sheila fought for that right every day—and every way she could. She was the definition of a five-tool-athlete—making progress in any position she could reach.

From her leadership as Executive Director of The Leaguers, to her time as President of the East Orange School Board, to her service as an Essex County Commissioner, to

her tenure as Speaker of the General Assembly, to her role, in my administration, as Lieutenant Governor and Commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs.

No matter the office, Sheila won whatever victory she could for the forgotten families of our state.

And as a changemaker, she was always ahead of the curve.

Decades before the two of us ran together, Sheila was, to borrow a phrase from President Teddy Roosevelt, “the woman in the arena”—striking against the ills and inequities plaguing our state’s families.

Raising the minimum wage. Investing in our schools. Caring for our environment. Combatting gun violence. Revitalizing our cities. Expanding access to safe, affordable housing—and more.

Sheila was moving the marker on all these issues way back in the day—back when she led walkouts at Weequahic High School.

Or when she fought for justice—one family at a time—as a social worker.

Or when—as an affordable housing advocate—she saved low-income housing units in Newark from being razed by a bulldozer’s blade.

That’s right. You want to know what’s stronger than 18,000 pounds of metal and machinery?

It is the grit and determination of Sheila Y. Oliver.

I know everyone here considered Sheila a hero. Well, I did too. And let me tell you about one time she truly saved the day.

Back in March 2020, when the first COVID case hit New Jersey, I was recovering from an illness of my own.

I had just undergone surgery, and while I was on the mend, it was Sheila Oliver who took charge as Acting Governor.

She led our state with a calm, steady hand—keeping our residents informed during those early days of the pandemic and marshaling our resources to protect public safety.

Meanwhile, I was lying in a hospital bed, thanking God that Sheila had agreed to join our administration as Lieutenant Governor.

It will take all of us—and more—to fill those shoes.

And that is why, soon, as a small tribute to Sheila’s lifetime of heroism and service, her official portrait, as Lieutenant Governor, will hang high in our State House. I hope to see you there for the unveiling.

One of the many great tragedies of Sheila’s loss is that our work together was far from finished.

She and I—we were elected to finish this job together.

And it breaks my heart to say: that is no longer possible.

So, here is the deal, New Jersey: I need you.

I need you to finish the job with me.

I need you to stand up and honor Sheila’s legacy by joining together to fight as one New Jersey family.

That, in my view, is exactly what Sheila would have asked of us.

So, let us follow her example—today, and every day to come.

Thank you, and God Bless you all.

Governor Phil Murphy

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