

Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean
Speech on the Occasion of the Youth Arts Policy Forum:
Ignite the Americas
Toronto, Tuesday, September 16, 2008



I am so happy to be with you tonight.

We are the Americas: a unique mixture of colours, cultures and ideas; a cosmic community, to cite the Mexican concept, a cosmic community that stretches from the rugged terrain of Tierra del Fuego, Argentina all the way to the low-lying tundra of Tuktoyuktuk in the Canadian arctic.

Our essence is rooted in the sophisticated precolonial civilizations of the Americas, in the ancient wisdom of Africa, in the adventurous spirit of the first European settlers, and in the resilience and determination of Asia.

Lest we forget, we are the heirs of a compelling story of courage, resistance and solidarity.

It is a story of millions of women and men, free and enslaved, who came together to break the yoke of empire, slavery and tyranny, to give a voice to the voiceless and to see liberty, equality and democracy triumph everywhere.

Even today, the struggle continues.

For citizens across the Americas are striving to redefine the social bond so that everyone has an equal opportunity to reach their highest potential.

But this work cannot happen behind closed doors.

If anything, our history teaches us that social change implicates families and friends, and the energy, the creative energy of the younger generation.

It emerges on the street corners of the barrio or favela, in the rolling fields and orchards of the countryside, and in the heart of small villages and reserves.

It is pursued within the precincts of community organizations, universities, public institutions and cultural as well as civic coalitions.

It is often driven by a higher, more universal yearning for "... equality," as the great South American liberator Simon Bolivar once put it, "in order to reshape... the human species... into one single whole."

We all know that the stakes are high for the Americas.

Disparities between the rich and the poor—between power elites and our indigenous and afro-descended populations—are exacerbating social exclusion and alienation.

Substance abuse is fuelling a violent drug trade that is threatening to destabilize our community of nations.

The rise of deadly pandemics such as HIV–AIDS is also bringing misery and suffering right to our doorsteps.

And youth are among the most affected by these realities.

How many of you have seen how intolerance and discrimination can shatter dreams?

How many of you have seen how poverty can breed insecurity and crime?

How many of you have seen how violence against women can tear families apart?

Dear friends—how many of you have lost someone to violence, distress, HIV-AIDS or substance abuse?

These issues are as serious, as they are real.

Yet we should not be discouraged.

For our history reminds us that we do not have to be victims; that deep in our hearts, we all possess, as Abraham Lincoln once said, a “divine spark.”

A spark that gives us the power to defeat the odds.

A spark that enables us to come together for the greater good.

A spark that can ignite the Americas, once again, with an inspirational message of hope and social transformation. Ignite the world with an inspirational message of hope and social transformation.

And I am persuaded, more than ever, that young artists in particular can do it! For the spark is in you, youth of the Americas.

I believe that you are the ones who can help us transform places where poverty and desperation run rife into spaces of hope and opportunity.

Why?

Because I have seen with my own eyes how artists are breathing new life into their neighbourhoods and communities.

During the first year and a half of my mandate, I had the privilege of crisscrossing Canada to meet citizens in their communities.

I was struck to see how so many youth are using the arts—whether it is hip-hop, graffiti, spoken word, animation, cinematography, drama, or popping and locking—to combat social exclusion, violence, crime, and apathy.

Whether it is at the Quickdraw Animation Society in Calgary, the Maison des jeunes de la Côte-des-Neiges in Montreal, the Centre A in Vancouver, the Saw Gallery in Ottawa, la TOHU in Montréal, Centre Jacques Cartier and La Maison Dauphine in the City of Québec, or, of course, the Remix Project, Schools Without Borders and Manifesto in Toronto, youth have found in the arts a powerful and effective tool to bring about meaningful change.

Even during my State and official visits to Latin America, I have been touched to encounter the same spirit of commitment and solidarity.

Just to give a few examples:

In Salvador, Brazil, I spent an entire afternoon with GAPA-BAHIA, an arts-based community organization, which empowers youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods to use theatre, hip hop and breakdancing to sensitize their peers about HIV-AIDS, racism, violence and homophobia.

In Rio, I learned how Afro-Reggae and Vivir e Crescer, two dynamic organizations, are blending Afro-Brazilian culture with hip-hop and the circus arts to empower youth from the favelas.

In Haiti, I met Haïti en Scène, a performing arts troop, which combines traditional Haitian music with rock and jazz to give opportunities to youth from poor neighbourhoods to find alternatives to crime.

In Argentina, I spent time discussing with the residents of one of Buenos Aires's poorest barrios at La Cava, an organization that teaches youth how to express their ideas and aspirations through animation and film.

Wherever I have gone, the message has been the same:

“The arts have saved my life.”

“The arts have helped me find my voice.”

“The arts have given me the power to replace violence with words.”

I was so inspired by what I heard that I decided to inaugurate the Governor General’s Urban Arts Forum in 2007.

This initiative brings together urban artists, legislators, policy-makers, philanthropists, business leaders, and civic leaders for one reason: to improve conditions in disenfranchised neighbourhoods across Canada.

The forums are based on the premise that the world cannot overcome the challenges of the day unless youth are equal partners and considered to be part of the solution.

I have hosted these forums in six cities across Canada and the experience has been incredible.

In many instances, they have become catalysts that have inspired artists, businesspeople and policymakers alike to collaborate in ways that ordinarily would be unimaginable.

To give you an example, last year I held a forum at Winnipeg’s Graffiti Gallery, in the predominantly Aboriginal neighbourhood of North Point Douglas.

There, in the midst of powerful testimonies, two girls aged ten and eleven had the courage to read an open letter, written like a poem, to the audience.

It explained how violence, drugs and bullying in their neighbourhoods made them fear for their lives.

Their eloquence and bravery inspired the entire community, provincial cabinet ministers, business leaders and the police service to unite and take back the neighbourhood of North Point Douglas from the gangs.

And a year later, the community is reaping the fruit of their labour.

By most counts, crime has gone down by 70%.

Over thirty crack houses have been shut down.

Residents feel safe to walk in their communities.

Now, I didn’t go to Winnipeg with a million-dollar grant or a legion of experts.

Instead, I went equipped with an opportunity to bring people together.

Equipped with faith in the innovative and creative spirit of youth.

Equipped with a conviction that art is an indispensable tool for social change.

Equipped with a desire to give a voice to the voiceless.

Equipped with a responsibility to ensure that decision-makers of all stripes know what is taking place at the grassroots level.

Dear friends, coming together around the common good is what igniting a society is all about.

And this is so vital today.

As an 11-year old boy once told me in a small town in Haiti, one of humanity's greatest obstacles is the spirit of egoism—that narrow “everyone for himself and for his clan” mentality—that is allowing indifference to flourish.

We will not be able to create a more just and more humane world unless we shed the fetters of selfishness and learn to work together in a spirit of compassion, inclusion and solidarity.

That is why I believe that the Ignite the Americas Youth Arts Policy Forum is so crucial.

This unprecedented, and dare I say revolutionary, partnership between the Organization of American States, Canadian Heritage, Manifesto, Schools Without Borders, the Remix Project and the pan-American youth arts sector, is laying the groundwork for a movement that can not only ignite, but also—dare I say—shake up the Americas.

For it is giving a voice to those who for far too long have been relegated to the margins.

It is opening the doors of our public and multilateral institutions.

In so doing, it is empowering young artists to use their divine spark for the greater good.

On the eve of the 250th anniversary of the birth of parliamentary democracy in Canada, I want to tell you that the work you are pursuing demonstrates that public institutions can stand united with youth of all backgrounds, that they can pay heed to your recommendations, and that they can help to build bridges across languages, cultures and generations.

This reality must be shared with decision-makers across the Americas.

I commit to sharing your unique message of hope, because I know how serious and committed you are not only to your art forms but also to the larger notion of the collective good.

While Canada is indeed a society in which freedom, diversity and democracy are realities, I would like you to know that we still have a lot to learn from those of you who hail from other parts of the Americas.

So, as we prepare to establish a pan-American network of artists, let us draw from the spirit of courage, determination and fraternity of our forbearers in order to create a structure that will help improve the lives of all citizens of the Americas and build a North-South/East-West partnership based on respect, recognition, equity, trust and compassion.

Because as a young man told me last year in a favela in Rio, Brazil, “Changing the world is a shared responsibility.”

We can only do this together.

For we are the Americas.