

Providence Journal

Kennedy challenges experts to launch ‘new era of brain science’

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BOSTON — Invoking his late uncle John F. Kennedy’s pledge 50 years ago to send a man to the moon, former Rhode Island congressman Patrick J. Kennedy on Tuesday challenged a gathering of top scientists, political leaders and medical experts to “explore inner space” and launch “a new era of brain science.”

“This is the moonshot of our time,” said Kennedy. An issue that is “not only a matter of science, but of civil rights.”

In his first major initiative since leaving public office, Kennedy served as chief organizer of the three-day “One Mind for Research, Imagining the Next Decade of Neuroscience Research and Development” forum at the Sheraton hotel. It ends Wednesday.

Vice President Joe Biden was scheduled to give Wednesday’s keynote address at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

Other conference headliners included Max Cleland, disabled Vietnam veteran and former Georgia senator; Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli, the Army’s vice chief of staff; and former Missouri Rep. Richard Gephardt, chairman of the Council for American Medical Innovation. Cleland, who lost an arm and both legs in battle, spoke Monday.

Garen Staglin, a California philanthropist whose son’s battle with schizophrenia led him to partner with Kennedy in advancing the cause of mental health, worked with Kennedy in developing the One Mind initiative.

One of Kennedy’s central themes was the plight of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. He said their “invisible wounds” linked to brain injuries and other battlefield traumas and their soaring suicide rates should galvanize a concerted effort to treat them, he said.

“When we shun our returning heroes because of the particular kind of trauma they incurred in the service of our country, that is not only a civil rights issue, it is a travesty and a moral outrage. And it’s time for it to end,” Kennedy said.

Kennedy said, “Fifty years ago, almost to the day, my uncle, John F. Kennedy, turned America’s attention to the moon. There were those who said a goal of that magnitude at a time when resources were so scarce was a fool’s errand.

“There were those who said America lacked the confidence to attain a goal so literally high and far away. Many Americans worried that our country’s rising fortunes had reached a plateau,” said Kennedy, “that other nations — competitor nations — would soon take the lead in science and technology.”

But in launching that new frontier, the former president “captured the American imagination,” Kennedy said. And while America has pioneered, and met “so many of the challenges that John F. Kennedy described,” one of those has not been met — unraveling the mysteries of the brain.

“We’ve had a war on cancer, but never a war on depression,” Kennedy said. “We’ve had a war on poverty, but never a war on Parkinson’s disease. We’ve had a race to outer space, but not a race to inner space ...”

He said, “We’ve come here to launch One Mind for Research because we need a laser-sharp focus on changing the lives of people with brain diseases, not research for research’s sake.”

He added, “Above all, our challenge is to summon what we most need — and that’s a moonshot not a scattershot.”

Kennedy opened his speech with an emotional tribute to his mother, Joan Kennedy, in underscoring the fight for acceptance and treatment of brain ailments.

As Joan Kennedy watched from the front row, the former congressman cited her “public struggles” with alcoholism and addiction; the same public struggles he has endured. And, the same struggles that led him to fight successfully for passage of mental-health parity legislation, which he called the triumph of his career in office.

Kennedy drew a comparison between the cancer treatment afforded his brother, Teddy Kennedy Jr., and the prejudice his mother faced in a less-forgiving era.

“When it came to my brother and his cancer, we had no problem saying a family member of ours was suffering from a disease that needed to be treated with utmost urgency,” Kennedy said. “In fact, the whole world turned to help.

“But I was struck early on by the difference between illness that afflicted my brother and the illness that afflicted my mother. In the real sense, she had the double challenge of not only confronting an illness, she had to confront prejudice ... as not being someone as deserving as my brother” of medical care.

Kennedy wiped away tears when he said, “I want to tell you today, my mother is my profile in courage for all she has done to stand up to this stigma and for living a fulfillment of this life and dignity.”

(Correction: *An earlier version of this story reported the wrong day for Kennedy's message.*)

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