

Tenement Museum President, Kevin Jennings Gala 2019 Speech

We thank everybody in attendance and everybody who gave so generously!

Read Tenement Museum Kevin Jennings's speech in full below:

As we've just seen, from Washington to Obama, Presidents of both parties have beautifully and eloquently extolled the value of immigrants and immigration to America. But things are more complicated than this video would suggest. There's a darker side to our history as well. Our leaders have not always been so kind to newcomers, and have sometimes made comments like these:

"Those who come hither are generally of the most ignorant Stupid Sort of their own Nation... They come in droves, and they will soon so outnumber us, that...we will not...be able to preserve our language and even our Government will become precarious..."

You may be wondering who made these frankly xenophobic remarks, or what newcomers so alarmed them. They certainly sound like they could have been pulled off of someone's Twitter feed this morning. But they weren't. They were taken from an essay written by Benjamin Franklin in 1751 in response to the influx of German Protestant immigrants.

It's startling to see that anti-immigrant sentiments predate the founding of our Republic, and that even one of our most revered Founding Fathers indulged in such ugly bigotry. But such bigotry has permeated our history. When the Irish fled the potato famine in the 1840's, they encountered a hostile America where "No Irish need Apply" clauses were routinely found in want ads. The Chinese who came to build our transcontinental railroads were subjected to virulent racism and eventually forbidden entry thanks to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The Italians who came at the turn of the century were, in this cartoon, depicted as rats, and their entry would eventually be de facto banned for a half-century by the 1924 National Origins Act. Like their Chinese counterparts, Japanese immigrants were confronted by nakedly racist reactions, reactions that led to their internment during World War Two. "Land of the Free"? Not always.

The British politician Tony Benn once said "Every generation must fight the same battle again and again," and indeed it is now our generation's turn to fight what seems to be the eternal battle in American history between those who uphold our ideal of being a land of refuge versus those who would shut our doors to newcomers. And the Tenement Museum has a unique role to play in this moment. A recent poll by the Pew Charitable Trust asked Americans what institutions they trusted to provide credible information. History museums came in at the top of the list, far outpacing newspapers, nonprofits, and the government. In other words, people will listen to what we have to say, so let's go out and say something.

Last summer our board adopted a new vision statement which made our position clear. We are working towards an America that embraces and values the fundamental role of immigration. We are taking a stand, and we are seeking new ways to educate Americans about how immigrants, migrants and refugees have helped build our nation into what it is today. We begin of course with the over 280,000 visitors who will come to Orchard Street

this year – 1 in 6 of whom will be school children. But we seek to go beyond those who take the F train to Delancey Street to reach folks who may never set foot in New York. We are branching out into digital media with ventures like our first ever podcast How to Be American, which has garnered over 50,000 listeners during its first season. We are engaging in public education through traditional media such as op-eds in venues like the Washington Post and, yes, Fox News (your eyes are not deceiving you), correcting the misinformation that pervades the public debate on immigration. And we're developing and disseminating curriculum through schools, working to raise a generation of young people who understand that America would not be America without immigrants and their many contributions to our nation. Our goal is to reach millions, not thousands, with our message, and to help change the terms of the national debate on immigration.

At this juncture in history, we cannot be neutral. What motivates me are the words of the Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, who once "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment— become the center of the universe." I firmly believe that, were Mr. Wiesel still alive, he would say that immigrants must be at the center of the universe. We at the Tenement Museum will be standing by their side in the years to come. I thank you for standing with us.