

Salaam alaikum, and a warm welcome to you all.

Thank you Armand, for the kind and generous introduction. It is a pleasure to be here tonight -- with esteemed members of the diplomatic community, civic, business and cultural leaders, and most importantly, leaders of the Muslim community of Ottawa. This evening actually marks my first Iftar, and I am honored to join you all in reflection and celebration of the holy month of Ramadan.

Before I begin, let me say - I know we are all heartbroken and outraged by the horrible shootings and murders in Orlando on Sunday. Over the past two days, Bruce and I have been so grateful to our Canadian family, for your empathetic words and acts of kindness and support for the US and for the LGBTQ community. Now -- more than ever -- we simply must come together and lean on each other for support and strength. As the President said, "In the face of hate and violence, we will love one another. We will not give in to fear or turn against each other. Instead, we stand united."

Gathering at tonight's Iftar, we come together from diverse backgrounds - representing many races, ethnicities, religions and sexual orientations...Tonight we show how strong we are together. We will not let fear or hate change who we are or the values that we cherish. We will continue to use the power of our collective voices and actions to forge a path ahead, and to work towards Tolerance and love for ALL people in this vast yet interconnected world.

I have thought a lot about the importance of shared experiences and shared stories in order to gain a deeper understanding of each other. To push back against darkness and to find solutions for prosperity and peace, we must open our arms and hearts, and constantly strive to learn and grow in new ways. I believe that through authentic human connection, we gain deeper understanding and empathy, which only strengthens and unifies our world.

So - tonight, I'd like to start by sharing with you some of my own story, and my family's history, which is integral to where I come from and my own journey.

Over 100 years ago, my paternal great-grandparents fled Belarus and immigrated to Canada and my maternal great-grandparents immigrated to

the US from Lithuania - all in search of economic freedom and to escape religious persecution. You see, my family is Jewish, and my great grandparents were looking for a place to call home where they could celebrate their faith and raise their children in safety. Because of my family history, I have always deeply believed in the preservation and importance of religious and individual freedoms.

I grew up a small town girl, in Ashland Kentucky. I attended Vanderbilt University and met the love of my life, my partner Bruce – who is here tonight. We spent 34 years in Chicago, raising our kids and engaging in work and in our community.

In 2006, Bruce and I were invited by a good friend to attend an evening with our first-term Senator from Illinois, Barack Obama. Listening to him speak, we both just knew – his vision was our vision. We wanted a national leader who would champion the initiatives that we had been working on at a community level for so many years.

President Obama believes in the power of diversity and personal liberty. It's a belief that the President shares with Prime Minister Trudeau: that we are all equal in rights and dignity, and we are made stronger not in spite of our differences, but because of them.

Bruce and I worked for the President's campaigns in 2008 and 2012, and when Bruce was called to serve as US Ambassador, we both immediately embraced the opportunity to work for President Obama and represent the United States to Canada, our closest friend and neighbor.

This brought my story back to Canada, a century after my paternal great-grandparents first immigrated to your incredible country.

Bruce and I approached this posting like we have always approached life – together - Bruce leading as Ambassador, focusing on political and commercial responsibilities, while I have taken the lead on our cultural engagement.

I decided that my mission here in Canada would be to create diverse and new communities under one big, ever-widening tent - where connections could be made and cross-border dialogues about universal issues could be shared. I

have focused on three pillars of cultural engagement – the arts, ideas and social innovation, and the engagement of youth.

Through my work, I have had so many wonderful chances to learn from my new Canadian friends – and in fact, before my arrival in Canada, I will admit that I did not know much about Islam. I only have a few Muslim friends back in Chicago, and as I mentioned earlier, tonight is my very first Iftar.

My window into Islam and the Muslim community here in Canada has been through new friendships forged and many shared experiences over the past two years. These relationships have served to deepen my belief in the importance of opening up and reaching out. I have explored and deepened my understanding of the Muslim faith through the incredible people that I have come to know and cherish, and the memories that I have made.

Mobeen Khaja and his wife Anees are both friends who I have connected with at many of our arts events here in Ottawa. From Mobeen, I have learned about the incredible story of the growth and impact of the Association of Progressive Muslims of Canada, and of Mobeen’s decades long relationship with the US Embassy and countless US Ambassadors that are his friends.

I have also had the pleasure to get to know Goldy Hyder, who is here tonight, and was moved by his speech at the Rideau Club this Spring where I garnered a deeper understanding of his life and his family’s experiences as Muslims living in Canada.

Mohamed Thiam, is a New Canadian, a young artist, who joined us for an intimate conversation that we hosted at our home – Mohamed spoke candidly and honestly about his life experiences, and the importance of his art as a means for the self-expression of his identity as a Muslim Canadian.

And finally, Bruce and I have visited the Sadaqa Food Bank to lend a hand in their halal food distribution. Sadaqa is an affiliate of the Ottawa Food Bank, a project run by Ottawa’s Muslim community that provides halal food items to families in need. Through my conversations at Sadaqa, I was motivated to further deepen my understanding of the challenges facing the community, and I was also truly touched by the warm welcome from the families and volunteers that I met.

In Islam, there is a hadith that says: God helps the servant as long as the servant helps his brother. In other words, we're summoned to serve and lift one another up. In my faith, tikkun olam is defined by acts of kindness, or mitzvot, and these acts are performed to perfect or repair the world.

As I learn more about Islam, and about the world, it is more and more apparent to me that all religions share these universal values – generosity, caring, and sacrifice. As President Obama said, “For all of us, whatever our faiths, Ramadan is a reminder of just how much we share. The values of peace and charity, the importance of family and community - these are universal values. The command to love one another, to uphold justice, and to care for the least among us – these are common threads in our faith traditions.”

We are all looking for connectedness and balance. Our joy is to share in the responsibility to make our world a better place, and to open our arms and our hearts to others, learning and growing through shared experiences and new friendships. And I can think of no better way to come together than the sharing of a wonderful Iftar meal with friends here in Ottawa and with Muslims around the world, breaking fast and joining in spiritual reflection – and of course, enjoying some delicious food and fun!

Recently I have learned that the Quran teaches that God's children should tread gently upon the earth and, when confronted by ignorance, reply “peace.”

Tonight, as a Canadian/American family, North Americans rich with opportunity and diversity, let's affirm that we can work to overcome challenges and injustice --- and that together, we will protect the values that unite us... and pursue “peace”.

The food smells wonderful, and I'm sure you're all hungry. Thank you for asking me to share in your celebration. To all of you, Ramadan Mubarak.