

U.S. Rep. Joe Kennedy stresses importance of liberal arts at Amherst College event

By: Rachel Swansburg

AMHERST—Saturday, on the steps of the Robert Frost Library, U.S. Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy III spoke of the importance of liberal arts in society as part of an event at Amherst College.

Entitled “Poetry and Politics: A Celebration of the Life and Legacy of JFK,” the event honored the congressman’s great-uncle, President John F. Kennedy, who gave a speech in the same spot nearly 54 years ago. Joseph Kennedy, who represents the Massachusetts 4th Congressional District, was the keynote speaker at the event, his remarks to an audience of about 400 serving as the conclusion to the day-long [colloquium](#).



U.S. Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy III at Amherst College on Saturday.

Kennedy began his speech with a few lighthearted jokes, first thanking Amherst College President Carolyn “Biddy” Martin. “Thank you, Madam President,” he paused. “It’s got a certain ring to it that I was expecting to say more often,” he quipped, referencing Hillary Clinton’s unexpected defeat in the [U.S. Presidential Election in 2016](#).

“We gather to commemorate a defining moment in a defining place for two extraordinary Americans. One, a proud Yankee poet, and the other, a proud Irish-American president,” he said of Robert Frost and President Kennedy respectively. Frost was a poet and longtime professor at Amherst College, for whom the college’s library was named. President Kennedy delivered a [speech](#) for the library’s groundbreaking in October of 1963.

He then dove into the heart of his speech, stressing the importance of liberal arts and the connections poetry and art have throughout society. He quoted President Kennedy’s 1963 speech, saying, “When power leads towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and the diversity of his existence.”

Kennedy highlighted the contrast between the quotes of his great-uncle from half a century ago and the political climate of the Trump presidency today. “[We are] undoubtedly worried that our deeply fractured country has lost that touchstone for judgement,” he said.

He continued, referencing issues such as President Trump’s [alleged ties with Russia](#) during the 2016 campaign, his apparent lack of concern for civil rights, his divisive immigration policies, and his controversial tax plans and healthcare bills. “It is no secret that we are here in turbulent times. Where policies and politics reflect a society where to be different or diverse is weak, and to be vulnerable is shameful and scorned.”

“That is not who we are,” he said.

Kennedy emphasized that art and poetry can be used to help people make connections and better understand one another: “For we trust our artists to expose the burdens that many of us bury within. We ask them to bravely share their vulnerabilities to help us recognize our own. We depend on them to remind us of our individual frailties – that they are not unique, but rather can be built upon and fortify common cause.”

Stressing the importance of liberal arts helping a society find focus and fight for a common good, Kennedy said, “Art and academia don’t just allow for introspection, they require it. And in so doing, they inspire us to create the tangible, societal change that otherwise resides solely in our imagination.”

Kennedy noted a few Amherst College alumni who had built successful careers in education, healthcare, and judicial reform, saying, “I don’t believe that Mr. Frost or President Kennedy could envision the change that would begin within this building [the library] behind me.”

He concluded his speech by underlining the importance of carrying a liberal arts education throughout life. “That is our ultimate American and human truth: that we are a work in progress,” he said.

Walter and Kathy Mullin of Amherst noted how the young congressman reminded them of the late President Kennedy. “This is the kind of eloquent, beautiful speech that he [JFK] gave,” said Kathy Mullin.

Walter Mullin commended the inclusion and optimism that Kennedy displayed in his speech. “What’s amazing to me is the way that he can embrace all human beings. It’s different from the division that we’re so familiar with,” he said. “I was hoping that would be the main discourse that would occur today - and it was.”



President John F. Kennedy at the Frost Library groundbreaking in 1963. Photo courtesy of Amherst College.