

Remarks from Secretary of State Shemia Fagan Swearing In Ceremony

Delivered January 4, 2021 in Dufur, Oregon

Thank you Governor Kate Brown for the warm welcome. Thank you Jim for always being in my corner. And thank all of you for joining my family as I accept the honor of becoming Oregon's 28th Secretary of State.

Welcome to my Fourth-Grade classroom in Dufur. I was 8 years old when, homelessness, disguised by a loving father as a camping trip, brought my family here to Dufur in Wasco County, a small farming town of about 650 people. After spending the summer camping and staying with a family from our church, my dad rented a small house here in town. By the time I landed in this room, in 4th grade, I was a 10 years old kid losing hope. In 4th grade I first discovered my mom's battle with drug addiction and my dad was really struggling to raise three kids by himself.

This was Mr. Waggoner's classroom and I caused a lot of trouble in here. Mr. Waggoner's response? He invited me to join his after-school chess club. We would play every day – right over there. That spring, I traveled from this classroom to Portland and became an Oregon State Chess Champion. I'll never forget the way that I felt walking out of that tournament in Portland. My older brothers, who were normally picking on me, were hoisting my trophy over their heads and chanting, "my sister's the champion."

For the first time, I knew that it didn't matter that I didn't have everything that other kids had, that I was going to be O.K. A moment like that, hope like that, a teacher like Mr. Waggoner, can change a life. And he did.

So that is why, instead of standing in our beautiful and historic State Capitol, I chose to stand here, in this historic place, to become your secretary of state.

Over the past year, during my campaign for this office, I learned that most people have no idea what the Secretary of State does. And that's ok. We're going to work on that. Secretaries of States across the country have been called the "guardians of democracy".

Perhaps the most well-known slogan of our democracy comes from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address "Government of the people, by the people, for the people." We've all heard it thousands of times, ever since we sat in classrooms just like this. But as your new SOS, as Oregon's guardian of democracy, I wonder what these words can mean today, in 2021, for us. All three of President Lincoln's ideals "of, by, and for the people" are meaningful and there is a much to say about each. But for brevity, I just want to focus on a government "of the people." That our government is run by everyday people.

We've probably all heard that "everyone puts their pants on one leg at a time." But after a year when we didn't necessarily put pants on every day, perhaps we have an opportunity to look a little deeper than slogans.

A government “Of the people” gives us the opportunity to recognize the basic humanity in the people in it, our capacity to make and admit mistakes, and to be capable of empathy and growth. This isn’t just about the leaders frequently mentioned in the news, but also the government “of the people” who are doing their work without much recognition; local school board members agonizing over decisions about reopening schools while a deadly virus spreads; city councilors struggling to redefine public safety because of the impact of over policing on black and brown communities county commissioners from Clatsop to Malheur; Wallowa to Curry fighting to keep their neighbors in warm beds this winter, public health officials trying to persuade a polarized public to come together to defeat once in a century pandemic County clerks blocking out the noise and just reporting the votes as they are cast.

And our “of the people” government does not stop with elected officials. It is also a government of the firefighter saving homes and lives; of the call center worker answering the small business hotline; of the officer responding to a domestic violence call; of the public health nurse and in home care worker nurturing the sick and dying and a government of the sanitation workers making hospital rooms clean and safe for one of us who might need it.

A government “of these people,” a government of everyday people, chosen by everyday people, for the good of everyday people is definitely a democracy worth guarding.

Oregon, thank you for trusting me as your guardian of democracy, as your Secretary of State. I am eager to get to work.