

Nancy Reagan, “Just Say No” Speech, September 14, 1986 (abridged)

. . . so much has happened over these last years, so much to shake the foundations of all that we know and all that we believe in. Today there’s a drug and alcohol abuse epidemic in this country and no one is safe from it—not you, not me, and certainly not our children, because this epidemic has their names written on it. Many of you may be thinking: “Well, drugs don’t concern me.” But it does concern you. It concerns us all because of the way it tears at our lives and because it’s aimed at destroying the brightness and life of the sons and daughters of the United States.

For five years I’ve been traveling across the country—learning and listening. And one of the most hopeful signs I’ve seen is the building of an essential, new awareness of how terrible and threatening drug abuse is to our society . . . Listen to this news account from a hospital in Florida of a child born to a mother with a cocaine habit: “Nearby, a baby named Paul lies motionless in an incubator, feeding tubes riddling his tiny body. He needs a respirator to breathe and a daily spinal tap to relieve fluid buildup on his brain. Only one month old, he’s already suffered two strokes.”

Now you can see why drug abuse concerns every one of us—all the American family. Drugs steal away so much. They take and take, until finally every time a drug goes into a child, something else is forced out—like love and hope and trust and confidence. Drugs take away the dream from every child’s heart and replace it with a nightmare, and it’s time we in America stand up and replace those dreams. Each of us has to put our principles and consciences on the line, whether in social settings or in the workplace, to set forth solid standards and stick to them. There’s no moral middle ground. Indifference is not an option. We want you to help us create an outspoken intolerance for drug use. For the sake of our children, I implore each of you to be unyielding and inflexible in your opposition to drugs.

. . . Our job is never easy because drug criminals are ingenious. They work every day to plot a new and better way to steal our children’s lives, just as they’ve done by developing this new drug, crack. For every door that we close, they open a new door to death. They prosper on our unwillingness to act. So, we must be smarter and stronger and tougher than they are. It’s up to us to change attitudes and just simply dry up their markets.

And finally, to young people watching or listening, I have a very personal message for you: There’s a big, wonderful world out there for you. It belongs to you. It’s exciting and stimulating and rewarding. Don’t cheat yourselves out of this promise. Our country needs you, but it needs you to be clear-eyed and clear-minded. I recently read one teenager’s story. She’s now determined to stay clean but was once strung out on several drugs. What she remembered most clearly about her recovery was that during the time she was on drugs everything appeared to her in shades of black and gray and after her treatment she was able to see colors again.

So, to my young friends out there: Life can be great, but not when you can’t see it. So, open your eyes to life: to see it in the vivid colors that God gave us as a precious gift to His children, to enjoy life to the fullest, and to make it count. Say yes to your life. And when it comes to drugs and alcohol just say no.

Read the full speech online at CNN.com:

<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2004/reagan/stories/speech.archive/just.say.no.html>.