**Remarks of Gerard Quinn**

**US International Council on Disability**

**Gala Event**

**United States Institute of Peace**

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Thank you so much.

What an honour indeed to be recognized by USICD and by three simply amazing Americans – Marca Bristo, Eric Rosenthal and Patricia Morrissey.

Your names are known in the tiniest corners of the world – because you have always connected with people and have always reached beyond yourselves. To me, you are America at its best.

My own relationship with America is both personal and professional.

First the personal.

Maybe its not so surprising that I have more living relatives in America than I do in Ireland – most of whom live in the glorious city of Chicago. Most of them settled here over a hundred years ago. I lived with some of them for a short while when I was younger. They taught me to work hard – but also to dream big. They lent an extremely generous hand to my family when the need arose. They worked hard and gave a lot to this country and fought proudly to defend it. A wonderful representative of the Chicago family is here tonight – Jean Butzen – welcome Jean!

My own grandmother went back and forward to America and eventually settled in Ireland -otherwise I would not have been born! It must have been hard for her to leave all her brothers and sisters in Chicago. We learned something nice about her recently. We traced her place of residence in Connecticut on the Ellis Island archive to the house of Mark Twain where she was a house servant. She apparently came back to Ireland around 1910 cooking Cajun food which she must have learned from Mark Twain’s Louisianna cook! I think she must have had to add potatoes to ensure it was eaten!

It is these tiny links that help define who we are. To paraphrase Lincoln – whose monument gleams behind us tonight - these are the ‘mystic cords of memory’ that bind us together across the Atlantic.

So when I say ‘thank you tonight,’ it is for more than this honour – it is for the enormous warmth and generosity of spirit of America that enabled my extended family – and countless others like them - to flourish and, in their turn, to give back to the country and give to others.

The personal is much more important to me than the professional.

But the professional in me has always been attracted to something noble in the American spirit. Its finds echoes in Republican Rome – the idea that the truly free person is the person who belongs and is acknowledged to belong. The truly free person is the one who does not just hide behind the protective wall of the Bill of Rights but who exercises public freedom – the right to enter all public spaces, to participate, and to give no matter how small. You can see this ethic shine through in the original debates between Adams and Jefferson about what it means to live in a Republic. This idea of civic virtue and of public freedom defines America for me. And you can see it emblazoned on the ADA.

While still on the professional, I rounded out my own formal education with a masters and doctoral degree from Harvard – I didn’t know how blessed Chicago was with world-beating schools at the time! My wife and I returned to Ireland in the late 1980s and I was so thoroughly immersed in abstract legal theory that I had lost connectedness to simple terrestrial affairs. This changed with a bang in 1989 when our first girl was born with a disability. We were young parents with no idea of disability or of the barriers faced by citizens with disability.

Then my life changed utterly one day when I saw President Bush Snr sign into law the ADA. I remember saying to myself – that's what we should do here – and by here I meant Europe and not just my own country. By the way, I was delighted recently to see Bush ‘43’ honour his father in his book ‘41’ with a famous picture of the signing ceremony. I don’t think you realize in America just how much the values behind this legislation inspired the whole world.

My life has never been the same since 1990. Inspired by the ADA I was active in the Irish Government’s Commission on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, I have worked at European level to ensure we too can release the creative energies of our citizens with disabilities. I would like to acknowledge with special thanks the presence here tonight of the Irish Ambassador to the US – ambassador Anne Anderson as well as representatives of the permanent representation of the EU to the US. Ireland has done a lot to create space for its citizens with disabilities and indeed won the Roosevelt prize for innovation. We are very proud of that achievement. And the EU has made enormous strides since the 1990s and was in fact one of the main drafters of the UN disability treaty. Its makes its presence felt on the world stage though its large development aid budget which is beginning to become inclusive of persons with disabilities. Thank you for your presence here tonight. By it you make real the natural transatlantic bridges on issues like securing freedom and the right to belong for all our citizens with disabilities.

And I worked alongside Marca and Eric to bring to life the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Let me say at once, this treaty is yours – it was not possible without you – without the inspiring example not just of the ADA but many other pieces of legislation as well as caselaw. Its underpinnings come straight from your playbook – centering people in their own lives, breaking down barriers to ensure everyone can enter the lifeworld, give back and feel valued, and make sure that our social supports actually support rather than undermine and segregate.

Can I say this: having the UN treaty without the US as a ratifying State is a bit like Hamlet without the Prince. I look forward to the day when you can join the global conversation about how to move things forward through the common language of the treaty which is framed mainly on your own edifice.

I am conscious that I am here in the presence of Senator Tom Harkin. You are all well aware of his crucial role in drafting the ADA. Senator Harkin, it isn't just America that is in your debt – it is the whole world. The ADA is the law that launched a thousand imitations right across the world. You might say Senator Harkin is an honorary Senator in all legislatures of the world! Your achievements were for all of humanity and not just for your constituents. It is rare to have someone of such stature – someone whose message is as instantly recognizable in Minsk, Galway, Pretoria or Santiago as it is in DesMoines or Iowa City. I join in saluting you tonight because in many ways you are not just the father of the ADA but also the father of the UN treaty.

Let me finish with a little story. When I was just 18 I toured this great country on my own in a Greyhound bus for two weeks (my mother didn’t realize what this meant – in fact she thought one could go from Chicago to Boston in two hours by bus !). I stopped off here in DC for two lovely days. I went up to Senator Ted Kennedy’s office and knocked on the door. After a little flurry Senator Kennedy came out beaming and put his arm around me for a nice photo which I still have. There was nothing in it for him –no votes in Dorchester or Brighton. Just the pleasure of connecting with someone from the ‘Ol country. When his brother Bobby died Ted recalled in his eulogy something that Robert had previously wrote as follows:

…we can perhaps remember -- even if only for a time -- that those who live with us are our brothers; that they share with us the same short moment of life; that they seek -- as we do -- nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and happiness, winning what satisfaction and fulfillment they can.

I don’t think I can do any better to describe why I have been active in disability policy and I salute the USICD for reaching out to their brothers and sisters right around the world.

Last but certainly not least, I share this honour with my wife Anne whose love and support and whose quest for the best life possible for all our daughters has been the mainstay of our family.

And I share this honour in remembrance of the matriarch of my Chicago family – Margaret Carlson – who, aged 98 passed away recently. She – and her sister Katherine Butzen – were my American mothers. They were decent, hard-working people. We owe it to them and people like them to continue our work and to do our part to reach out to our brothers and sisters throughout the world. It is this reaching out and beyond ourselves that distinguishes the USICD and it is why I am so happy to be here tonight.

Thank You.