

As Prepared for Delivery: Opening Day Speech by Speaker of the House Elijah Haahr

Secretary of State Ashcroft, Judge Goodman, Representative Anderson, members of the Missouri House, honored guests, and fellow Missourians....

Welcome ... to the 100th General Assembly.

I have stood at this spot more than a few times and yet somehow today feels completely different.

To my colleagues; I am honored you elected me to serve as your Speaker. There are no words that can sum up what I am feeling.

I would like to say a few words about the people, the process, and the policies we are here for.

Let's start with the people.

I would not be standing here today without some very important people in my life and I want to take a moment to introduce them to you.

Maybe no one else in my life is as responsible for my interest in politics as the people sitting to the right of me, my parents, Roger and Kathy Haahr. When I was 12 years old, my parents started volunteering on a State Rep campaign. I marched in parades, knocked on doors, and stood at the polls. Our candidate lost. Not only did he lose, we lost to a man that would eventually stand on this Dais as Speaker of the House. Two decades later, the experiences of that campaign are why I stand here today.

Sitting next to them is my brother Noah and his wife Meagan.

My parents taught us that we should pursue our dreams no matter what people thought of us.

They raised me, a lawyer and a politician, and my brother a used car salesman - we obviously took that lesson to heart.

Next to them are my sister Hannah and my niece Montana. For anyone who is attending the legislative ball this evening, please do not believe anything Hannah tells you about me.

Some of you are also fortunate enough to know my wife, Amanda. Most of you rarely see her because she is watching our 4 children while I have the honor of being here 4 days a week or campaigning for my House colleagues around the state. Amanda has put her legal career on hold so I can serve in office. This is all possible thanks to her support.

With her are our two oldest children, Jackson and Reagan. Their twin sisters, Scarlett and Alexandra are across the hall watching TV to make sure you could hear me.

Each one of us has friends and family here to support you like I have with me.

...Parents and grandparents, siblings, and spouses.

Without all of you, we wouldn't be here. We wouldn't have this opportunity. We wouldn't get to stand on this floor in this arena and debate the future of our state.

Wherever they are, whether on the side, down in front, in the upper gallery, or at home listening, we say thank you and I ask that you join me in giving them a round of applause.

We meet here today at democracy's front porch, in this historic Chamber to celebrate an historic occasion.

This is the beginning of the 100th General Assembly. Two centuries ago, Missouri's first General Assembly met in a different building representing a small state of 66,000 citizens. People that went to church on Sunday, went to work on Monday, went to vote on Tuesday and in between, built the greatest state in the greatest nation on earth.

Exactly 100 years ago this week, the 50th General Assembly convened the first full session in this very Chamber as the permanent home of the House of Representatives.

Today our state has grown to over 6 million people

If you love the quiet country life on a farm or near a forest, Missouri has land for you.

If you love the arts and entertainment of a large metropolitan area, Missouri has a city for you.

If you want a 4 year bachelor degree, Missouri has 13 world class public universities for you.

Whether you believe in the designated hitter or not, we have a baseball team for you.

And even though our great state now has only one professional football team, no matter where you live, Missouri is Mahomes for you.

For me, the House is a special place. It's the People's House.

The Missouri House of Representatives is unique. We have 163 members in our body and are the fourth largest legislature in the nation. Our citizens actually know us. They interact with us at the grocery store and at restaurants. They attend church with us. They know our names and our cell phone numbers.

And they elect us to speak for them on this Floor.

It is why, when we step onto this floor, we lose our individual identity. I am no longer Representative Haahr but become the Gentlemen from Greene. My voice is the voice of the 36,000 residents of my district...Of Quail Creek neighborhood and Wanda Gray Elementary, of Nathanael Greene Park and Chesterfield Village.

And this Chamber is a meeting place that unites us as a state.

Yes, we have our differences. Our debates become intense. But hopefully we never let fear keep us from standing for those meaningful ideas that could change our history.

As we begin this session, we should remember the words of Medal of Freedom recipient Thomas J. Watson when he said, "On the issues that seem important to you, stand up and be counted at any cost."

We will not fear spirited, intellectual debate; in fact, we will encourage it...Because a robust argument is a sign that our great Republic is working. But may we always be passionate about issues and not personal attacks.

We are a family with a common cause...to make Missouri a better place.

With that in mind, Minority Leader Quade and my Democrat colleagues, I will always value the ideas that you bring to the table. We won't always agree on policies. But, we always will agree on the goals of safer neighborhoods to raise a family in, ensuring a better education for our children, and building a stronger economy for Missourians.

In 1820, when the first general assembly met, Missouri was a state full of promise.

I believe that this, right now, is our moment to capitalize on that promise.

We have the lowest unemployment in decades. Employers from Leggett & Platte to the La Plata Hardware store are growing.

We have a geographic advantage in the middle of the country that no other state can claim. Whether on our highways, rivers or on freight rail, the goods for the nation pass through our state and our communities.

Whether you are here for Branson or Bass Pro, our tourism industry is booming.

This does not mean we can rest.

This year we will create Bold Solutions for the challenges faced by every Missourian.

At the heart of our efforts is one of economic growth. Our message that Missouri is open for businesses cannot be just lip service coming from this building.

The policies we pass must focus on cultivating employers, not controlling businesses.

Last year... we came together to provide historic tax relief for every Missouri family and businesses.

We are eliminating wasteful spending and remain steadfast in never spending more than we take in. For the last 15 years we passed a balanced budget without raising taxes on Missourians and that will not change on our watch.

Gone are the old ways of thinking that public money alone can end our problems.

Two years ago, this legislature fully funded the school foundation formula. Last year we did it again. And we will continue to do so. But the way we spend educational dollars is as important as how much we spend. We need schools that challenge yet support our students.

Our goal should always be this - to ensure that every child...and I mean EVERY child...in this state gets a world class education no matter their zip code.

And we won't stop there. If we want a 21st century workforce, we need 21st century colleges.

Hope must also extend to the Missourians trapped in the hold of opioid addictions. The House will continue to lead the charge to confront the opioid epidemic raging across our state.

And while we are at it, we must provide opportunities to those in a broken criminal justice system. Last year the House unanimously passed reforms to our sentencing laws and we will again lead on these reforms.

Most importantly, as legislators we stand for every Missourian...we stand for the innocent, the infirm, the born and the unborn.

The issues before us are many, but the question of our time is narrow: Did we advance Missouri forward? Did we seize the moment to be bold...or were we satisfied to play it safe?

Today, we gather, just like the Missouri leaders did 200 years ago, ready to serve. We have an opportunity; YOU have an opportunity that few are afforded in life...To improve Missouri in a bold way.

Our nation is a young one. Our state is even younger. And not only is it young, we are young. Today, I am the youngest Speaker in the nation. Sitting on this floor is Dirk Deaton, the youngest state legislator in over a hundred years. Representing us in Washington is the youngest Senator in the country, Josh Hawley.

We are brimming with optimism and energy, ready to embrace innovative ideas for our state. The cynics scoffed and said we dream too big. Really, the cynics just thought too small.

It is not our age that tells our story. It is our experiences.

Each of us today walked down our own road, with many different twists and turns, with our own vision of a better Missouri. The personal experiences we all bring to this Chamber are what make a citizen legislature so valuable.

I am the product of a stay-at-home mother. She home-schooled her three children while my father got his hands dirty every day, as a carpenter and small business owner, building homes in Southwest Missouri.

The greatness of our state and our nation is that anyone, ANYONE, can achieve something in their life no matter where they started.

We didn't get here because we were handed it, we are here because we worked for it.

Our birthright is not dictated by our birthplace.

Our achievement is not conditioned by our income.

Americans can do anything they set their mind to.

And Missourians will show them the way.

From growing families to the greatest generation, from entrepreneurs to empty nesters, we are the voice of Missourians pursuing the American dream.

Let us join together, seize the opportunity, and be bold.

Thank you for the honor to serve as your voice and your Speaker.