

First Citizen Banquet

- *May 23, 2019*

- *Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

Thank you Bob, Mark, Dorothy, and Jim for your tributes. And thank you Seattle King County Realtors for this recognition as the First Citizen of the year in this 81st year of recognitions. You do a very good thing for our community by this annual award.

The recognition means everything to me even though I was very surprised when I was told about it. It means something very special to me because Fr. Lemieux in 1956 received it, and Fr. Sullivan in 1990 was named. Fr. Lemieux was 48 years old; Fr. Sullivan was 59. I'm 75, so I think this just proves that the 70s are the new 50s. Or at least I would like to believe it.

I want to thank my family—represented here by my sister Rosemary and her husband, Gene; her son, Will; and her granddaughter, Jordan, who is a Seattle U. student and a Redhawk. I come from quite a family of achievers: Mom and Dad would have had it no other way. But I was the shy one. When I was in my early years as president here and had given some talk, I would overhear Dad saying to Mom, “Honey, imagine our little Steve!” Hey, Mom and Dad, imagine First Citizen for your little Steve! Among the five kids I'd have willingly traded the honor of First Citizen to be able to get my turn riding in the front seat of our 1948 Hudson.

My second family, which has now become my first family, is the Jesuits. I owe everything to our life and companionship and reputation and spirituality and influence. Being a Jesuit is not something I do, it is who I am. I thank the Society of Jesus and my local community, many of whom are here, for accepting me, educating and forming me, bringing me along in my leadership, and loving me. My Jesuit brothers want to know if, being first citizen, I should now be referred to among them over drinks as “Prince Steve”. I think yes. Actually, “First Citizen” is an ancient Roman title for the Princeps Senatus, the head of the list of the Senators who was entitled to speak first in a debate. So, brothers, make it “Princeps” rather than “Prince” and let me speak first, as if I don't already do that!

Because of 8 years as a teacher and now 22 more years as a president I thank all my colleagues at Seattle U., board members and chairs, Cabinet members, faculty and staff colleagues, especially my assistants like Liz Pilati and Anne Moran, loyal families, donors, alumni and wild Redhawk fans. Wow have you been kind to me in brining me along and bringing out the somewhat good in me. I went straight from being a part-time, non-tenure track professor of Theology to being president with nothing in between. I needed your patience and your support and kindness and I got it. I cannot imagine any other university I would rather serve than Seattle U. I have a hard time imagining what it will be like in a few years to have retired from this university. Besides being totally helpless, I am sure I will be warmly and immensely and lovingly grateful for this great university and its students and colleagues.

Perhaps one reason I have been named Frist Citizen of Seattle and King County is because of the number and wide range of boards on which I have served. It has been much easier for me to get

on boards than to get off them. When I tried to get off the United Way board Jon Fine said, “I don’t need you to do anything; just please stay on the board for all I need is your “gravitas”. Bernie Noe at Lakeside said, “Fr. Steve you are not leaving till I leave” because he knew I had his back. On the University of San Francisco board I learned the reason they kept me was because with my timely deep-voiced, tempered-by-experience interventions I got the nick name of “The Voice of God”. Who is going to ask God to step off the board?! I learned that this same quality earned me a different nickname when I was told on the Independent Colleges of Washington Board, because of my sonorous comments, my nickname was “Yoda”.

What astounds me is that people think I have served this city and county significantly enough for this recognition. I think it comes from the fact that I have the best job in the county. Imagine being able to be a Catholic priest and so to deal with people on the deepest levels of their lives, to be a Jesuit with a 475-year tradition and spirituality which is so contemporaneously vibrant and world-affirming and needed, and to be not just a university president but the president of this independent, value-laden, university at the heart of and in service to this great city and region with both its memories and its momentum. Yes, I have the best job; and it is the job that places me at the service of the city and county. So in honoring me, you honor our Catholic community, the Jesuits, and Seattle University in its dedication in a hundred ways in and thousands of alumni to all of our people. In short, I believe you put our citizens first because our Church, the Jesuits, and Seattle U. puts those citizens first and will always to do so.

A special thanks to the Seattle King County Realtors for creating and giving this award each year to honor individuals but more so to call out and encourage the qualities we treasure and affirm in our wonderful city and county. Thank all of you for coming to this banquet. Your presence means everything to me and your commitments witness what this award seeks to promote by way of the service of all of us out of gratitude and love to all of our people. Know my personal thanks, my continuing service, and my daily prayer.