

Jen Brown Chapel Talk
April 22, 2026

I have avoided doing this for 13 ½ years - and somehow I knew the time would come when I couldn't escape "the ask".

It was very hard for me to think of a topic to speak about - in my mind I don't have a particularly interesting story, I live a pretty ordinary life. My path isn't anything super fascinating, but the one theme that kept coming back to me was being given 'The Gift of Helping Others'.

I come from a long line of strong, determined, very independent women. And I want to touch on a few of their stories that I believe in some way or another shaped the course of my life even though some of them came long before me.

My family has deep roots in Upstate New York. It is believed that we are part of the founding members of the town of Bath, in Steuben County. In November of 1896, in Bath, New York, the Steuben County Legislature convened for a regular meeting. One of the items on the agenda was a report of the special committee on the enlargement of the jail. Mrs. John Davenport, known in my family as Sarah Lyon Davenport, was one of the first female members of the New York State Commission of Prisons. She fought in regard to the crowded and unsanitary conditions of the county jail. Sarah Davenport had informed the Legislature that the jail could not pass an inspection by the Prison Commission. She told them that the urgent needs of the Steuben County jail were for increased cell room, a hospital room, and a bath room. There were 55 prisoners in the custody of the Sheriff at that time, but only 30 cots for their sleeping accommodations, and the bathroom luxuries were supplied through one common wash tub. She fought for that prison for many years and was successful in achieving better living conditions in the jail.

Sarah Lyon Davenport had been appointed to the Prison Commission in 1895, at the age of 49, and had been on the State Charities Aid Association since 1884. She was, also, for many years, a Trustee of the Davenport Home for Orphan Girls with her husband's family, and though she never

had any children of her own, she wanted to save the world from suffering wherever she saw it, even beyond Bath, New York.

She had a gift for helping people. Even prisoners and orphans.

That led down a few more generations to my grandmother and her 2 sisters. Growing up in Buffalo, NY, Nancy Lyon, my grandmother, and her sisters were very proud of their Lyon family history. Much research has been done over the years of our family lineage, which is where I learned of Sarah Davenport. Nancy's sisters never had any children, so I essentially had 3 grandmothers on my fathers side. My Great Aunts Ann and Betsy dedicated their lives to serving others both in large and small ways. Aunt Betsy was a volunteer at her local hospital outside of Boston for her entire life. She became the volunteer and transport coordinator and continued volunteering well into her 80's. My Aunt Ann worked tirelessly fundraising globally for the UNICEF organization for as long as I can remember. She and my uncle would take amazing trips all over the world to help young children learn to read and write. I can remember many years of looking through what seemed like thousands of slides and pictures from their adventures. The stories of these children and all of the photos on their kitchen wall made me realize that though they never had children of their own, the children of the world belonged to them. They kept in touch with several of these kids through the years, often bringing them across the world to share in holidays with us. We never knew who would show up for Thanksgiving!

Aunt Ann attended Radcliffe, the women's college of Harvard at the time, and she and my Uncle Lionel were big supporters of their community and the arts - They were members of the Hospitality Club in Buffalo. When visiting dignitaries or professors would come to the University of Buffalo, members of the club would host them. One summer when my father and his sister were visiting when they were young, my Aunt Sally fondly remembers a man from Nigeria named Mr. Ufot being at dinner with them. He had 12 children at home and they became Aunt Sally's penpals for many years.

They were also given the gift of helping others.

My Aunt, Sally Kingman, who I just mentioned, my father's sister, also has no children of her own. She was in the Peace Corps for many years when I was young and eventually became a 5th grade teacher in some rough inner city schools. She was in Africa when I was born, and loves to tell stories of her years in India as well. I can't tell you how many times we heard about how she had to eat caterpillars and sleep in a grass hut when I was little! I do realize that she did that to make us appreciate all that we had as we grew up. When in Africa, she lived in a place called the Central African Republic. This part of the country has been at war for many, many years since her return. And throughout my life she has kept in touch with a very special family in CAR. Marcel and his children and grandchildren live a very difficult and scary life. She actually returned there a few years ago when it was safe enough and my kids and some friends were able to write letters to the children of that family and send baseball hats and other "American" items to them. They were so excited to receive these gifts because they knew that my family cared for them from across the world. Aunt Sally has been faithfully sending money to Marcel and his family for years and years, and when things seemed safer for them, they were finally able to build a family home.

The gift of helping people.

My own mother, Peggy Kingman, who passed away 16 years ago right after my youngest son was born, instilled in us the fact that this world doesn't revolve around us and that it was our job to help others when they need it most. She was sick for many years, and my teenage years weren't like that of my friends. I had to take care of my younger sister and my dad because she physically couldn't, and it was such a privilege to be able to help her do that.

The gift of helping people.

So now there is me. And while I haven't changed the lives of anyone across the globe, I feel as though this gift has been passed on to me and my generation. My sister and all of my cousins on this same side of my family are educators, and they have made profound impacts on children of all ages through music, reading, art and counselling. I was a wedding planner. And looking back at how superficial that sounds compared to everyone I have spoken about, over the years I have had the honor of helping over 500 people plan the most important day of their lives. The deeply personal connections we made in the year or months leading up to their special day truly meant something to those brides and grooms and their families. I have several past clients that I am still friends with - one family in particular. I helped with their daughter's wedding on 7/7/2007. That was a very popular date - the bride's mother lives in my neighborhood, which I didn't know at the time I was working with them. I see her out walking almost every afternoon, and to this day, if I'm out walking my dog, she occasionally stops to tell me "I can still remember Marie and Nathan's day - thank you for all you did". That was almost 20 years ago. Fast forward to today, and I have dedicated a large part of my life to serving this community. That gift of helping people comes through in a different way than the other women in my family, but I hope that in some small way I have had some impact in this amazing place. It has certainly impacted me.

Hospitality is a number of things - some of it good and some not so good, but at the end of the day it is about making people happy and not expecting anything in return.

A few months ago, my oldest son, Logan, was presented with a great opportunity while at college. He was asked to have lunch with a very important donor for his major at his school. He took advantage of that opportunity and asked the gentleman what he needed to do to be successful in his life. This man gave the analogy of a first responder - that in the event that something happens, the first responders are there. You may never know who they were or when exactly they arrived, but you will always remember what they did.

Always be the first responder.

The gift of helping people isn't about any awards or accolades or recognition. It's actually the exact opposite of that. It's finding your own joy in other people's gratitude. It's knowing what someone needs before they ask for it. It's recognizing that even the simplest gesture can change someone's day and in turn it will probably change yours too. This is not my tangible gift to give to you, but it is me being given the gift of the opportunity that I have to serve and help someone.

Thank you all for being a part of my journey.