

Madison Civics Club, October 29, 2011

Remarks by Frederica Freyberg, anchor "Here and Now" on Wisconsin Public Television

"History as It Happens"

It is my distinct honor and privilege to be before a group of involved and aware citizens that make up the membership of the Madison Civics Club. Especially as you mark your 100th anniversary. Your accomplishments and calls to action over the last century remind us that History Matters and we are all a part of that history. In our own time we live it.

Nearly 50 years ago when my mother was a journalist in the early days of television, she had occasion to be on the air for a local station when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Though perhaps relegated at that time to hosting a "woman's noonday show," she was directed to talk "live" about the death of the President. I don't know if they didn't have satellite shots to Washington then, or what, but she apparently filled for some time and impressively. Over the years her former news director has regaled me with this story. But it turns out she was most able to discuss the life and politics of JFK. She had just returned from Washington where my father had served in the Kennedy administration. And she was, after all, an educated and engaged citizen.

That was certainly a moment marked in history for our nation. Now nearly half a century later – I had occasion to be a television reporter covering an historic "moment." This time specific to Wisconsin. The moment that turned into days and months of protest, court cases, recall elections and in the end a new way of doing business with public employee unions in this state.

All of us reporting on all of this knew we were covering something huge. Something historic. Shouldering our way through tens of thousands of protesters was the first clue.

In the midst of this reporting, I had one of those "yes!" moments as a reporter – knowing I had a scoop – and a pretty big one – in the midst of what was supposed to be a state Senate session where the full body would take up the now infamous budget repair bill.

Once in the press area of the state senate chambers – and while waiting for the start – my reporter peers mostly had their heads down, tweeting, or e-mailing, or blogging or whatever. The session was supposed to begin at 11 a.m. About three minutes before the start of it, Democratic Senator Tim Cullen, walked in – saying he had a statement he wanted to pass around about the death of former Supreme Court Justice Bill Bablitch. No one else was really paying attention when I asked Sen. Cullen if I could talk with him on camera about it. A minute or so later, I asked him if he didn't need to be taking the floor. He said "oh, no. I have to go." I said "what do you mean you have to go?" He said "we're all leaving. Leaving the state." What? I asked if I could also talk about THAT on camera. In our quick interview he told me it was a decision leadership had made because the minority had no other way to slow down the process. We followed him, getting video of him hustling out of the capitol. What happened right after the Senators' exit was surreal, almost comical if it weren't so serious. The Sgt.-at-Arms was dispatched to go to every democratic Senator's office to bring them back to the chambers. Of course they were all gone,

but the Sgt. looked under desks and inside closets just to make sure....So began weeks of huge protest that culminated in the conference committee vote that had Rep. Peter Barca screaming about a violation of the open meetings law.

That vote ushered in a vote in the senate, which was the source of the court case and ultimate Supreme Court decision upholding the budget repair bill and resulting law. The night of the conference committee vote and senate action the PBS NewsHour invited me to be on the program to describe what had happened in Wisconsin. At the time I thought – really? This happened fast and way outside normal process. Reporters heads were still spinning. But I walked through it with Jim Lehrer – all the while thinking to myself – gee I hope my analysis of this proves correct. I'm happy to report that my analysis held up...the facts having been parsed out in circuit court and the Supreme Court. We got it right for the national audience as well as our own. So whereas my Mom told a state audience about a national event, I told a national audience about a state event. Each of us brought experience and engagement to the assignment.

But what does all of this say to you – members of the Madison Civics Club now celebrating your 100th anniversary? I think it says history matters. I think it says – your history as engaged and aware citizens matters. I think it says documenting history and reporting on it as it happens accurately and factually doesn't just matter. It's like a sacred trust between the journalist and the viewer, or listener or reader. I think as long as there is a nexus of engaged citizens and journalists, (and even engaged citizens AS journalists) the history that shapes our world will be better understood and appreciated 100 years from now.