The Honorable Mary Landrieu, U.S. senator from Louisiana since 1997, addressed the 2013 annual meeting of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) at a luncheon honoring four Louisianans for their public service. They included General Russel L. Honoré, U.S. Army; Chancellor James L. Llorens, Southern University at Baton Rouge; Mayor Mitch Landrieu, City of New Orleans; and Professor Astrid Merget, Public Administration Institute at Louisiana State University Baton Rouge and honorary co-chair of the 2013 ASPA Conference. In her remarks, Senator Landrieu reflected on her lineage in public service.

Introductions, such as the warm one offered here at the ASPA conference, often herald my family lineage as key to my record of public service. To be sure, our family heritage highlights my father, Moon, as mayor of New Orleans and secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; my brother, Mitch, now mayor of New Orleans and previously lieutenant governor of Louisiana; and my sister, Madeleine, a judge on Louisiana’s Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. That is an impressive tradition, but it surely is not a matter of the “right” schools and the “right clubs” or some other elitist entrée.

Instead, in our family, our public service commitment captures the quiet yet powerful influences of my childhood. Ours was a large family of nine children, and I was the eldest. Watching out for the younger ones both in my home and in school instilled a sense of familial and communal responsibility early on. We had no nannies or hired caretakers on the salary of a public servant.

Our home celebrated caring for each other—parents for children, older children for younger ones, and across all ages for each other. That sense of caring was further reinforced and disciplined by my early education with the Ursuline Sisters in New Orleans.

A stunning revelation came early on with volunteering and tutoring other children. It startled me then that children my own age could not read and that they often lived in appalling conditions even compared to our relatively modest circumstances. The sisters at the Ursuline Academy impressed upon me the duty and the responsibility of each individual for caring for each other—the very essence of public service. This ethic of public service was reinforced by my family and augmented by my studies at Louisiana State University.

Not long after school, those sentiments of service prompted me to run for public office and become a state legislator at age 23. After eight years, the citizens then elected me state treasurer for two terms before Louisiana sent me to the U.S. Senate.

Throughout my childhood and up to this day, natural disasters, especially hurricanes, have punctuated my career in public service. In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, I was literally “on the ground” in Louisiana for over a month—and not just inspecting, surveying, and commiserating. I honestly did pitch in and helped chainsaw trees out of flooded houses. My own house as well as my parents’ family homestead suffered severe damage.

The citizens and my family shared the devastating experiences, but my position in public office was empowering. Being senator helped in securing billions of dollars in rescue and recovery funds, in jump-starting recovery and restoration projects, and in reforming the federal role with its capacity for effective disaster response.

But long before Katrina, the other storms, the oil spills, and the flooding rivers had wreaked havoc on the state. My upbringing instilled a sense of helping others through those horrific times. Early training as a Girl Scout and Brownie taught me how to “prepare” myself and my family, let alone help others, as we navigated disasters.
Serving as a policy maker years later helped me galvanize the nation’s resources to rescue and recover in the immediate aftermath of disaster, devastation, and despair, be it natural or social or economic or be it in the Gulf Coast, as in Katrina, or along the Atlantic shoreline, as in Sandy. Illiteracy and inferior education for our youth trouble me now, as it did disturb me as a girl tutoring those less well off. Homeless children without nurturing families sustain my dedication to adoption. Small business enterprises that dot the Louisiana landscape elevate economic development as an ongoing concern not only for financial livelihoods but also for people’s sense of worth.

Public service is about helping people and their communities and planning for their vitality into the future. Our citizens in Louisiana and elsewhere are amazingly resilient, yet they need help. They need help not just from fellow citizens and charitable organizations; they need the help of government in the state and the nation.

My role as senator enables me to leverage the resources of state and national agencies as well as to mobilize public attention on such critical issues as the preservation and productivity of our human and natural resources. Communities along the coast and the waterways—in the United States as well as abroad as in the Netherlands—may have distinctive needs, but like all citizens, they need to invoke the best minds in science, technology, economics, culture, and public policy to marshal our abilities to ensure our long-term viability. That only happens when coalitions form, collaboration trumps contention, and compromise with consensus prevails. That can happen. Witness the RESTORE (Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States) Act of 2012.

Public service in my life may locate its original passions and pursuits in my childhood, my family, my education, and my youthful pursuits. Those offered me the training ground to learn how to serve the public.

My hope is that what animates my passion for public service is my tireless advocacy

- For those suffering in the wake of poverty, illiteracy, family breakdown, as well as natural and manmade disasters
- For marshaling help for their recovery, resilience, and resourcefulness
- For being with and of the citizens—on the ground, so to speak—during their most trying yet seemingly hopeful times of transition.

If my story of public service offers an overarching lesson of appeal to young people—including very young people—it is to go out and serve, thereby making a difference. And do so with passion and conviction.