

She didn't make the rodeo, but Young is still a star

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As a 6-year-old, Catherine Young dreamed of becoming a rodeo star. Twine, a wooden post and a run-away heifer combined to put a dramatic halt to that aspiration. One thing she didn't dream of, Young told a full-house audience at the Women's Leadership Center on the Alfred University campus Thursday, was becoming a public servant. Yet that has been her career: First a member of the Cattaraugus County Board of Legislators, then Assemblywoman (1999-2005) and State Senator (2005 to present). Young spoke on her path to leadership as part of the Women of Influence series sponsored by the AU Women's Leadership Center. Her first mentor was her grandfather who "worked every single day of his life" on the family farm in Livingston County where Young grew up. From the time she could walk, she said, she followed him around the farm, learning from him the value of hard work. She worked all during high school and college. Graduating in 1983 when jobs were difficult to find, she became a reporter for a weekly newspaper, covering a variety of municipal boards, and worked a second job cleaning office buildings. In both jobs she found value, she said. "Adversity can be opportunity." When fire destroyed their barn when she was 14, she learned the value of good neighbors and people helping people, Young said. She also learned the importance of giving back to the community through volunteer work. "I ask all of you to make sure you volunteer," Young said. "Volunteer, roll up your sleeves, be a doer, not a critic." After she moved to Olean in the mid-1980s, Young worked for the Rehab Center, which serves developmentally disabled adults. Working for a human service agency is a "great career goal," she said. "Places like the Rehab Center have hearts and souls." For any job, "give it your all, but be true to yourself." Young has role models among the leaders in the women's movement, too, she said, citing New Yorkers Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who worked to secure the right to vote for women. She said she's proud that a woman was elected to the State Assembly in 1919, a full year before women could vote in New York. A current-day heroine of Young's is Nettie Mayersohn, a Democrat with whom she served in the Assembly. When Mayersohn learned that 59 percent of all HIV-positive babies born in New York State hospitals went home with the disease undetected, when early treatment could improve the quality and length of their lives, she began a campaign to mandate testing of babies before they left the hospital. In spite of the "firestorm" her campaign unleashed, Mayersohn persisted. Today, 98.9 percent of babies who are HIV-positive are identified before they go home from the hospital. That's the kind of leadership and courage that's needed today, Young said. "It's all part of being involved." Asked about compromises she's had to make as a politician, Young cited Gov. Eliot Spitzer's proposal to cut \$1.3 billion from Medicaid funds, something she and other Republican Senators believed would directly affect patient care at hospitals and nursing homes. "The cuts were way too deep," she said, acknowledging that New York needs to do something to cut its health care spending. The cuts proposed by the Governor would have had devastating effects in Western New York, where hospitals and nursing homes "already have the lowest reimbursement rates (for care provided to Medicaid-eligible patients) in New York State." Seventy percent of a health care facility's costs are for labor, Young said. Fixed overhead costs cannot be easily cut, so the only place where hospitals and nursing homes can reduce expenses is for labor, and that would hurt patients. "We found hard to restore" the funding, said Young of her Senate colleagues, who were successful in persuading the Governor to restore \$350 million for Medicaid. Former Alfred mayor and now Trustee Virginia Rasmussen asked Young about the possibility of the state increasing aid to localities. Rasmussen called the situation "unsustainable" in which 1,000 to 1,100 full-time residents of the Village of Alfred "try to support the infrastructure for 8,000 people who are in Alfred during the working day. "I doubt there is any other campus community (in New York) that is as choked as we are," said Rasmussen. The Village of Alfred is home to both Alfred University, with 2,300 students and 500 employees, and to Alfred State College, with 3,200 students and 500 employees. Yet, Rasmussen said, the state revenue sharing returned to municipalities is "well below what the law says it should be. We got more aid from the state in 1988 than we do now." Under state law, 8 percent of the state's revenues are to be returned to municipalities in the form of revenue sharing. Over the past two decades, the percent of revenues returned to municipalities is about 2 percent, or 25 percent of what the law says. Young acknowledged that providing increased aid to municipalities is a necessity, particularly for towns and villages, such as Alfred, where large amounts of property are either tax-exempt or owned by the state. Previous attempts to correct the situation faltered, but Young expressed hope that under a new Governor, action might be taken. Asked what course of action she would recommend to someone interested in becoming a state senator, Young said, "Do the volunteering," which helps make your name well-known. "Get a broad range of experience. Get involved in your community. Work on your public

speaking," she advised. "If you can, run for local office." Women hold about 25 percent of the seats in the State Legislature, Young said. "It is still a male-dominated culture. The Legislature is an institution, and things are done a certain way." In spite of that, she said she personally "has been given every opportunity," and believes that women can be successful as legislators. Among the most difficult things she faces are debates. "They can be tough. You're getting attacked. It's difficult, but you have to stay focused." She said she also has to speak to people "who, philosophically, are not in sync with you." But, she's found, even when her audience disagrees with her, "they are genuinely and generally nice and appreciate your being there. That's the important thing: You are there." "What inspires and energizes you?" a member of the audience asked. "Hands down, it's the people," Young responded. As a Legislator, you can "help people, work with people, and see what a difference you can make." The state has finite resources, so how does Young, as a legislator, prioritize how the funds should be spent? Young said her first priority, and that of many of her colleagues, is "job development," and that's one reason why she "supports what's happening here in Alfred." Through research and development, and educating students, Alfred University helps not only the region, but the state. Infrastructure is another issue for upstate New York, Young acknowledged. "We've been isolated historically. We're the furthest away from Albany and New York City," and support for the area reflects that, she said. "We're a diverse state, with lots of needs and competing priorities," but for her, the top priorities are "jobs, health care, education and tax relief." She continues to be concerned about housing as well, she said. "New York State is an old state, and our infrastructure is aging. In my district, the housing stock is very old," she said, and she's worked to "bring in more money for new housing and rehabilitation of older houses. I've been successful, but there's always a tremendous need."