



Monday, May 5, 2025, at President Woodrow Wilson House

Good evening, everyone, and welcome to the President Woodrow Wilson House. I am Elizabeth Karcher, Executive Director of this historic site, and I am delighted to welcome you to the second annual ***Fashioning Power, Fashioning Peace exhibition, and gala.***

It is a privilege to greet so many distinguished guests this evening—**members of Congress, esteemed ambassadors, Cabinet secretaries, and leaders from the diplomatic, military, cultural, business and philanthropic communities.** We are grateful for your presence and your support. I extend special thanks to our parent organization, the **National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Wilson House Advisory Council, the Host Committee** and our exceptional **Wilson House team**, whose dedication makes tonight possible.

For those visiting us for the first time, the Woodrow Wilson House is a historic landmark, a fully accredited presidential museum preserved just as it was when President and Mrs. Wilson lived here a century ago when they retired from the White House and public life. Our mission is about much more than preservation. **The highest and best use of this site is to harness the power of place to inspire honest reflection, civic engagement, and global understanding.**

Fashioning Power, Fashioning Peace explores fashion *as a diplomatic language*—expressing cultural **identity, political ideals, and the universal aspiration for peace.** By bringing together designers and embassies from around the world, we transform this historic house into a **platform for dialogue, artistry, and connection.**

And while tonight is a celebration, it is also a reminder: institutions like ours don't exist by chance. We are ***not*** federally funded. Beyond tours and programs, we rely on the generosity of private donors—people like you—to survive and thrive.

I want to share something-

I grew up in New Jersey, next door to my grandfather. In front of his house stood a magnificent magnolia tree—a towering, bold, tree where we grandchildren played endlessly. This tree, struck by lightning once, survived—a symbol of resilience and strength. It had a long, blackened scar that reminded us of how close that lightning had come to the house and that while it struck the tree, the tree still stood and was spectacularly beautiful.

Years later, I returned to show my own children this beloved place and the tree was gone. I felt a deep sadness, realizing that something so vibrant, so full of memory, had vanished. I found myself saying to my children, "There used to be a magnificent tree here," and felt the emptiness of that statement.

President Woodrow Wilson House

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I have been thinking about that lately..

When I started here at the **President Woodrow Wilson House** six years ago, we aimed to make this Historic house museum something extraordinary. We looked to one of the top 10 think tanks in the world, the bipartisan **Woodrow Wilson International CENTER for Scholars** (also known as the **Wilson Center** and unrelated to us other than our shared namesake) as the pinnacle of what **the Wilson House** could be. We even modeled our **Wilson House Scholars Program and our Speaker Series** after it, envisioning a hub for learning and dialogue.

We never imagined that the **Wilson Center**—the **towering institution I admired**—would one day be forced to close its doors.

But strength, we've learned, is fragile. The magnolia tree **felt invincible—until it wasn't**. The **Wilson Center seemed untouchable—until it wasn't**. And now, I ask you to imagine a future where your children or grandchildren pass by and say, **"There used to be a museum here, and now it's gone. There's used to be the Wilson House and now it's gone."**

We gather in celebration—but also in recognition of a hard truth. Museums and cultural institutions across this country are facing a moment of profound vulnerability. Even as we preserve history and create spaces for education and dialogue, we are under increasing strain—**financially, operationally, and existentially**. While culture is essential, too often it is the first thing put at risk.

If you believe, as we do, that future generations deserve to stand here and say, "Yes, it's still here," then we ask you to continue to support the Wilson House to keep this house—and its mission—alive for the next century and beyond.

Thank you for your commitment, your generosity, and your belief in the power of **culture and place** to shape a more just and peaceful world.

And now, it is my pleasure to introduce someone whose leadership has been instrumental in tonight's success. Janet Pitt, Chair of our Host Committee, has brought vision, dedication, and heart to this endeavor, and we are grateful for her partnership.

Janet will introduce our very special honoree for 2025, to whom we are proud to present **the Woodrow Wilson House's** highest award, the **Esther Pin**, in recognition of her remarkable contributions.

Please join me in welcoming Janet Pitt.