



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a reception to thank dedicated individuals
for their efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic
20 August 2021
Schloss Bellevue Park**

What a view from up here! What a pleasure to finally welcome guests to the garden of Schloss Bellevue once again – and, indeed, a crowd of such special guests! A very warm welcome to you all!

Take a look around the park for just a moment. Look at the people to your left and right. They are aged between 14 and 83; some of them come from the mountains of southern Germany, others from the north German coast, or from the shores of the Rhine, the Oder, the Danube or the Elbe; they were born in places including Kassel, Kinshasa and Chemnitz and they now live everywhere from Ahrensfelde to Zirndorf, in large cities and small villages. Some have completed their studies or training; others are still in school, or already retired; some work as doctors or nurses, as school or preschool teachers, in shops, as street cleaners or on crisis task forces.

And yet there is at least one thing that you have in common, that unites you. You have all surpassed yourselves over the last year and a half. You have all done outstanding work. You have all set an example to follow in the fight against the pandemic!

Today you are here at Schloss Bellevue representing the many thousands of others who have worked just as hard across the country. And if this garden were as big as the Lüneburg Heath, then I would have been delighted to invite them all here this evening. Nevertheless, my wife and I would like to thank you and them from the bottom of our hearts on behalf of our country. Thank you for your hard work, your perseverance, your courage! Thank you for everything you have done, for what you do day in, day out, and will continue to do in the future!

If we look back at the last year and a half – how easily we could have lost heart, in the face of this virus, how quickly it spread; in the face of so many people who were infected, who became severely ill or

died; in the face of setbacks and mutant strains; in the face of all of the restrictions, disappointments and hardships.

But you rolled up your sleeves and tackled this pandemic head on. You were not discouraged. And so you have given others courage – your neighbours, your patients, your customers, your students, the people around you. All of us. Your courage is infectious – the only infection, truly the only one, that we are happy to risk!

But in all seriousness – you have done outstanding work. Because this pandemic is a once-in-a-century crisis – for every one of us and every family, for our country, for Europe, for the whole world. The pandemic is a test of our humanity. It brings out the worst and the best in people. We have seen plenty of both over the last year and a half. All of you, ladies and gentlemen, have certainly shown the best of yourselves. You are role models who have made Germany proud.

Your work, your dedication speak for themselves. Under enormous stress, shift after shift after shift, at great risk to your own health, you have fought to save lives on COVID wards in hospitals from Bielefeld to Berchtesgaden. You have kept older people in their care home in Greiz from becoming completely isolated. You have accompanied children in Braunschweig home from school. As a senior hairdresser in Herford, you have managed to offer your apprentices as much practical training as possible during the pandemic. You have sat by the side of young cancer patients in Regensburg. You have donated from your grocery shop in Langenhagen to support local food banks for neighbours in need. And you have set up activities to entertain children from disadvantaged families in Zerbst.

Take a look around you – I could keep talking for hours about each and every one of you. But no matter how much a Federal President relishes giving long speeches, we do still want to enjoy some hot food – I'll keep it short. Every individual story from this garden is a powerful lesson.

They show us that however great our worries, fears and setbacks, our courage is greater. However dangerous this virus and its variants become, our fortitude, our solidarity, our medicine, our progress are stronger. And however much the virus forces us apart, we will come together again, closer than ever.

Allow me to briefly single out two groups from among the myriad wonderful stories of humanity.

Many people have suffered during the pandemic, have tightened their belts, have had to bury hopes and dreams. But who has been braver than our children and young people? Is it even possible to measure how deeply the lives of the very youngest children are affected when they are cut off from their first social environment, from their preschool friends, for months on end? Or the lives of primary school

children who are now going into their second year having only ever seen their classmates on a screen? Not to mention young adults who have never set foot in their college or in a lecture hall, in the company training them or in the student bar, who are stuck in their childhood bedroom instead of leaving home – brought to a standstill right as their lives are beginning?

The fact is that young people have shown enormous solidarity with the old, the sick and those most at risk from the virus. They have acted responsibly, and taken on responsibility. This has been given far too little recognition, and it is something I have tremendous respect for. But what I expect now is this – it is now our turn, the older generation's turn, to show solidarity with our young people. Our country must do everything to ensure that children can once again go to school every day during this school year. That young people do not remain stuck on the sidelines any longer.

The pandemic has opened our eyes to our own vulnerability. A vulnerability that had seemed a thing of the past in our modern age, with its focus firmly on self-optimisation. And because we believed ourselves to be invulnerable, we as a society had very much lost sight of another group – all those people whose job, indeed whose vocation it is to protect the old, the sick and the most vulnerable among us. These people who give their all as health workers and carers have all too rarely received the recognition they deserve, and the pay they deserve.

It is quite right that our society is now starting to think differently, and it is quite right for us to show our appreciation with applause from our balconies, yes, but not only with that. Because when we describe the people in our healthcare system as "key workers", what we really mean is that they are key to our survival.

As we think about healthcare and other forms of care, we must not forget the crucial power of science and research. Some months ago, two other pandemic role models – two of your comrades-in-arms, one might say – received honours here at Schloss Bellevue: Özlem Türeci and Uğur Şahin, to whom we owe – alongside other pioneers – the astonishing vaccine breakthrough.

Who would have dared to hope in March 2020 that multiple vaccines would be available before the year was out? Who would have dared to hope that in the summer of 2021 almost everyone in Germany would have the opportunity to be vaccinated should they choose – including young people, who are increasingly the focus of these efforts?

My heartfelt thanks go to everyone who has already been vaccinated. Because taking the vaccine means more than just protecting yourself and others. Taking the vaccine is also a sign of respect for everyone here in this garden who has been giving their all in the fight against COVID. Only when as many people as possible have been

vaccinated will their dedication yield lasting results. Only when the vaccination rate increases significantly will we be able to put the pandemic behind us once and for all.

And so I ask of everyone who is still doubting or deciding – please, speak to your doctor! And speak to neighbours, friends, relatives who are already vaccinated and are now reassured that they and their loved ones are safer! I ask of you – please, go and get vaccinated!

When my wife and I, together with my team, began to plan this event, many of us hoped that progress with vaccinations would allow us to meet in a much more carefree atmosphere by the beginning of September. That the end of this summer would also mark the end of the pandemic.

But – as you will all be well aware – there is fresh uncertainty and anxiety around mutations of the virus, most recently the Delta variant. Numbers are rising sharply once again, and we are once again filled with unease about the future. On top of this, there are new catastrophes unfolding on front pages and news programmes – the disastrous flooding in the middle of the summer, and now the tragedy in Afghanistan.

All of these concerns weigh heavily on us, but I would like to reassure you of one thing – they do not mean that your efforts will be forgotten. On the contrary, they make the example that you have set, of dedication and solidarity and selfless humanity, all the more important as we continue forwards.

I remember how, at Easter almost a year and a half ago, I held my first televised speech on the COVID-19 pandemic. I think nobody would have believed back then that we would still be worrying about the pandemic a year and a half later.

In that speech I said that, after the pandemic, we will be different as a society. How we will be different is up to us. We can create a society shaped by greater humanity and solidarity. Today, we can see that the long months of the pandemic have shaken our society to its core and changed it quite radically. That much is certain. But the hopes of new and lasting solidarity, were they nothing but a daydream?

I do not think so. Have we not just seen – in response to the terrible floods – a tremendous wave of solidarity across the country? This, too – the many, many helpers who sprang into action, the volunteers and the professionals – will be in our thoughts tonight. We are extremely grateful to them.

And so I remain confident in the future despite all of the uncertainty. It is true that, after eighteen months, the pandemic has left its mark on us. But it is not just this dark side, not just suffering and anxiety, but also our experiences of solidarity and shared humanity that will stay with us. In the crucible of the pandemic we have seen that,

when the chips are down, we depend on each other – and we are there for each other.

That is and remains my hope for our future as a society. And the firm foundation for my hope is you!

But this evening, all you need to do is sit back, relax and enjoy good food, drink, music and entertainment. I'm aware that this isn't always easy for tireless helpers such as you. But you mustn't have a guilty conscience tonight! After all, this celebration is in your honour – so please go ahead and enjoy it. You have earned it!

My wife and I hope that you have a wonderful evening.