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PUBLIC INTEREST LECTURE

New York Law School
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HON. JUSTICE SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR (RET.)
UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT

EXCERPTS FROM *THE MAJESTY OF THE LAW*
HON. JUSTICE SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR (RET.)

*A toast to Potter Stewart,
His chivalry can't be beat;
The First Supreme Court Justice
To give a lady his seat.*

Most of the early women legal pioneers faced a profession and a society that espoused the view that women were by nature different from men. Women were perceived . . . to be best gifted for motherhood and home life—compassionate, selfless, gentle, moral, and pure. Their minds were attuned to art and religion, not logic. Men, on the other hand, were fitted by nature for competition and intellectual discovery in the world—battle-hardened, shrewd, authoritative, and tough-minded. Women were thought to be ill qualified for adversarial litigation, because it required sharp logic and shrewd negotiation, as well as exposure to the unjust and the immoral.¹

True victory for women at the work place did not come until after Congress passed civil rights legislation in the early 1960s, and it arrived partly by accident. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, an outgrowth of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' concerns about racial discrimination, was passed at a time when women's issues were not at the forefront of national attention. Indeed, the provision of the act barring gender-based discrimination by employers was not part of the original legislation. As the story goes, a congressman named Howard W. Smith introduced an amendment offering protection against sex discrimination in a last minute effort to defeat the entire legislation, because he believed that none of his peers would vote for protection for women. When the act as amended passed both houses of Congress, Congressman Smith, whose overriding purpose had been to prevent the antidiscrimination laws from going into effect, became an unwitting hero of the women's movement.²

Freedom and equality are not achieved overnight. Democracy takes work and time and constant effort. Liberty requires us to place ourselves in another's shoes, to see that things may not be as fair or as equitable as they appear from our own vantage points. Justice compels us to understand the rage, to feel the pain, to respond to the cries. Although it is easy to become impatient and disheartened by process failure and social discord, we must all take the long view of democratic change.³

¹ P. 189.

² P. 161.

³ P. 276.

EXCERPTS FROM *THE MAJESTY OF THE LAW*
HON. JUSTICE SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR (RET.) (CONTINUED)

Democratic reform also requires a strong judicial system in which wrongdoers, no matter how influential, are punished, and victims, no matter how powerless, gain relief. Only with an independent judiciary can there be any assurance that justice will be served.⁴

One of the strongest pillars of democracy is, I believe, the development of an educated citizenry. Establishing the right to vote is essential, but as we have discovered in the United States, citizens may not participate in the political process unless they understand it and believe they have a stake in the community. Nor can we be sure that the poor, the uneducated, the unskilled, will respect or abide by the Rule of the Law if they remain powerless and shut out. Although decent public education and job-creation programs strain government resources and taxpayers' wallets, their absence may engender even greater burdens: crime, homelessness, drugs, violence, alienation, despair. We cannot allow our children to languish. They are our legacies and our future. Democracy cannot flourish without them.⁵

Lawyers possess the key to justice under a Rule of Law—the key that opens the courtroom door. That key is not held for lawyers' own private purposes. It is held in trust for those who would seek justice, rich and poor alike.

While a business can afford to focus solely on profits, a profession cannot. It must devote itself first to the community it is responsible to serve.⁶

Meet My Grandmother: She's a Supreme Court Justice by Lisa Tucker McElroy (with help from Courtney O'Connor)

From the point of view of Courtney O'Connor, you will learn all about her grandmother, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, their relationship, and her work at the Supreme Court. There are heartwarming pictures of the two O'Connors spending time together. The reader will also learn about Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's daily life and the work of a Supreme Court Justice. This book is an excellent resource for young children in terms of learning about the Supreme Court and women's political issues; it also teaches a valuable lesson in civics.

Recommended reading for ages six to nine. Reviewed by Emma Shainwald, age eleven.

⁴ P. 275.

⁵ P. 274.

⁶ P. 230.