

Address to Barry University

Miami, Florida

May 10, 1993

Attorney General Janet Reno

I am humbled by your reception of me, and I am going to do my best to make you proud. On February 7th of this year, I received a call at 11:45 p.m. from Senator Bob Graham, saying that I would probably get a call the next day to come to Washington. In these three months that have followed, my whole life has passed before me; whether it be an F.B.I. background check, a questionnaire from the Judiciary Committee, or answering reporters' questions as to whether my mother really did wrestle alligators. It is extraordinary to feel a whole community reach out and touch you. I was in Washington, but I could feel Miami as home around me.

People may say "Well, she has no Federal experience. What does she know about being Attorney General? How is she going to handle the job?" I think the answer comes to the following - and I would like to share it with the graduates, because it seems like just yesterday that I was sitting in your chair in Ithaca, New York, without any idea about how the future would unfold.

One of the most important lessons I have learned in the last three months - and I knew it before, but never as I do now - is that community is one of the most important parts of your life. Wherever you go, and whatever you do, reach out and help build your community, for it will sustain you and carry you forward.

In these months all of my life has become alive again. I remember the teacher who reached out and touched me, and made a difference. I remember the person who gave me my first summer job, and the work ethic that job taught me. I remember the social worker I worked with at Jackson Memorial Hospital, who made a difference in the lives of people. I remember the colleagues I worked with in the State Attorney's office. I remember my Cuban friends who used to tease me about my funny Spanish accent, and how I wondered if I would ever become really fluent. I remember so much about this incredible community. So - wherever you go, remember to reach out and touch someone. It will stay with them for all of their life.

But, as part of a community, sometimes we fuss at each other, and certainly we have done that. I will always remember those days in May of 1980, when members of this community fussed at me and fussed at each other, and we saw violence and tragedy. Then I saw this great and diverse community take those frictions and tensions and put them behind, and start talking again. We have got to learn that the greatness of America lies in its diversity and in its differences, and we cannot let those differences create tension. We have got to have pride in those differences. We must join together to take those differences and form a whole community that prizes the richness of diversity, the strength of diversity, and the fact that this nation is so diverse, so remarkable, and so wonderful.

What this community has done is reach out and support me. In

the days following my nomination so much has happened, but this community has been with me every step of the way.

The next thing that has been obvious to me in these last three months is how important one's family is. When 37 family members gathered in the Roosevelt Room - from my year-old grandniece to my uncles - Bill Clinton said he had never seen anything like it. My relatives poked fun at me that weekend. When I came home and everybody was saying what a wonderful Attorney General I was, they quickly put me in my place and brought me back down to earth with teasing jokes and funny remembrances of so much of what had happened to us together. And in the loneliest moments, when there is nobody else there, the people who have gone before are there every step of the way.

I hope I will be a good Attorney General, but one of the things that will be as important to me is to know that I made a commitment to my family and honored it, a commitment that has been repaid 10,000 times over. If you have a good community behind you and a good family supporting you, then, when the buck stops with you, there is the strength of that community and that family to draw upon. But then, you do have to be accountable and responsible in daily life - in all that you do, in the big decisions and in the little decisions.

I will always remember what John Orr taught me when I campaigned for office in 1972. He had made a comeback and was elected mayor that year. In 1956, he had been the only state legislator to vote for a resolution supporting the ending of

segregation. He came home to an overwhelming political defeat. As he made his comeback, he and I campaigned together. He said "Janet, just keep on doing and saying what you believe to be right. Don't pussyfoot, don't equivocate, don't talk out of both sides of your mouth, and you'll wake up the next morning feeling good about yourself. If you pussyfoot or equivocate, or try to say everything to everybody to be popular, you'll wake up the next morning feeling miserable." Well, I woke up the morning after not feeling entirely good because I lost my election, but I remembered what John Orr taught me and it has held me in good stead ever since.

It was also helpful to find that somebody had put a biography of Abraham Lincoln on my bedside table and I learned that Lincoln lost his first election. It helps to know how to lose. You know it is not the end of the world, and you pick yourself up and move ahead.

So now I have gone to Washington with tremendous strength behind me, but with much to do because I also go with something this community taught me when I visited a school in Liberty City some years ago. The children prepared a model of the block they lived on. I could look out the window of that school and see that block. It had abandoned cars, overgrown lots, and houses in various stages of decay; there were probably crack dealers on the corner that I didn't see. But these children had built a model of the house they wanted, with green grass and trees and everything clean, the buildings painted and repaired. Each had put on a 3 x 5 card what they wanted for their community - no more guns, no more

people shouting at each other, no more drugs, everybody loving each other, and everybody being kind.

Then I arrived in Washington and went to a school where there had been great violence, and one little child asked me "When will I be able to go out and play again? When will I be able to walk home without being afraid?" I would like you to join with me as you go into the world of social work and teaching and all the careers that life will bring you. Take community and family, and rebuild around the children of America an environment where they can grow as strong, constructive human beings.

Let us develop an agenda for children that says we can do something about teen pregnancy. Let us make sure that parents are old enough, wise enough, and financially able to take care of their children. Let us provide our children with medical care and prevent illness, rather than wait until a crisis happens. Let us provide good care when parents have to work or when a single parent is struggling to make ends meet. Let us teach children to deal with conflict in a peaceful, non-violent way through conflict resolution programs in our public schools.

Let us focus on family violence. If you pursue a medical career, don't turn your face when somebody comes in obviously suffering from domestic violence and do nothing but fix the cut. We must realize that the child who watches his mother beaten is going to grow up to accept violence as a way of life.

Let us do something about giving our children of tomorrow a future and develop work-study programs and summer job programs that

will lead to skills that will enable the student to earn a living wage. And let us also challenge our youngsters to contribute through public service to build a better America.

But no matter what we do, the answer still comes back to family. I remember my afternoons after school and the summertimes, when my mother worked in the home and my father worked downtown. She taught us how to bake cakes, her favorite poems, and how to play baseball. She beat us when she thought we deserved it, and she loved us with all her heart. There is no child care in the world that could ever be a substitute for what that lady was in our lives. Somehow or other, we have got to be able to pursue the careers we have chosen for ourselves and make a commitment to the community, all the while remembering that the family has got to come first. Somehow or other, we have got to reorder our lives so that we can put family first every step of the way.

I think it is best said in the last two verses from the Book of Malachi in the Old Testament: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord; and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come down and smite the earth with a curse."

God bless you all.