

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

by

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

to

The Graduating Class of 1996

Eleanor Roosevelt High School of

Greenbelt, Maryland

Tuesday, June 4, 1996

U.S. Air Arena

Landover, Maryland

P R O C E E D I N G S

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Congratulations, to each one of you. This is a wonderful school, and I am so proud of the students, for I watched you deal with the problem of violence, and you did it with eloquence and common sense.

I watched you deal with a tragedy, and you did it with kindness and compassion and caring. You represent the very best among young people in this nation. What you have done in this school should carry your forward for many years to come.

It was just 40 years ago that I stood in your shoes; I just went for my fortieth high school reunion in Florida. I talked to my music teacher, I heard from my coach, my American history teacher --so many different people who touched my life. And now as I travel around the country as attorney general, I keep running into them.

The people who surround you here today will be part of your life for all time to come. And so from this community, where many of you were born, from this wonderful high school where you have learned, from the friends and family and teachers who have touched your life, you

will draw strength and courage and wisdom for the rest of your life.

And as you leave this school today, stop and cherish the people who have touched your lives, the teachers who have made a difference, the family that sacrificed for you, the friends who have stood by you. And then, for the rest of your life, reach out and touch others, and help them along the way.

As you go out to use the education you have received here, be yourself. Don't become known for how much money you make, or for what kind of house you live in, but become known for yourself, who you are, what you stand for, and how you help others.

"But," you may ask, "how can I help others? The problems of this country seem so huge, this nation seems so big, so overwhelming--how can I make a difference?"

Each one of us can make a difference. Think about the people who have made a difference in your life. And I see it across this country. I see a new spirit that was evidenced in this school this past year as I visited on two occasions--a new spirit across all America, of people caring, a can-do spirit, a spirit of giving, and a spirit that builds community.

I don't mean for a moment that you should be naive, but we were founded by idealists, with touch minds and tender hearts, and they formed a government designed to check the forces in human nature, just as they risked their lives to found a nation that provides more freedom and opportunity than any nation in the history of the world.

They took the hard way, and they made a difference.

So be determined, be prepared, and do not give up. I will share with you one of the greatest lessons I learned along the way to the point that I'm at now.

When I was about ten years old we lived in a little wooden house. There were four children in the family, a year apart, and we were quickly outgrowing the house. My father did not have enough money to hire someone to build a bigger house.

One afternoon my mother announced that she was going to build a house, and we said, "What do you know about building a house?" And she said, "I'm going to learn."

She went to the brick mason, the plumber, the electrician, and she talked to them about how to build a house. She came home and with her own hands and a pick and shovel she dug the foundation, she put in the wiring, she put in the plumbing, and my father helped her with the heavy stuff when he came home from work at night.

She and I lived in that house until I came to Washington--until she died just before I came to Washington. And every time I came the road with a difficult problem to solve, with a goal that I wanted to attain and did not quite know how I would do it, with a challenge that I did not know how to deal with, I saw that house standing there among the woods, and it was a symbol to me that you can do anything you really want to do, if it's the right thing to do, and if you put your mind to do it.

That house taught me an even more important lesson. In August of 1992, when Hurricane Andrew hit our area, head-on, at about 3:00 o'clock in the morning the winds began to howl with an unearthly noise that I had never heard before.

My mother got up, sat down in her chair, folded her hands, and was totally unafraid, for she knew how she had built that house. She had put in good materials, she had not cut corners, she had done it the right way.

You've had a chance to build a firm foundation here at Roosevelt High, and now is the time to move forward, and know that steps along the way will not be easy; but build your life the right way, do it the right way, and you will come out better in the end.

"But," some of you may say, "I'm not going to have any money."

We got ready to go to college, and we said, "How can we afford college, when there will be four of us in college at the same time?" And my mother said, "If you really want to go to college, you can do it. You can wait tables, you can work, you can make a difference in your own life," and that's what we did.

And then some people said, "Ladies don't become lawyers. You can't go to law school, ladies can't go to law school," and I said, "Well, I'd like to try."

I came home after graduating from law school and law firms would not give me a job, because I was a woman. Fourteen years later, one of those law firms made me a partner, and three years ago nobody said that I couldn't be attorney general.

Just stick to your guns.

[Applause.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Do and say what you believe to be right; don't pussy-foot, don't talk out of both sides of your mouth to be popular. Stand up for what you believe in, and be consistent. If people try to chop you down and you know you are right, stand there and be brave, and continue to state and act upon what you believe to be right.

You'll wake up the next morning feeling good about yourself, even if you sometimes lose, because I lost an election once. But I woke up the next morning and found that somebody had put a biography of Abraham Lincoln on my bedside table, and it helps to know that Lincoln lost his first election.

When you lose, pick yourself up and move ahead, and you can still succeed.

[Applause.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: But along the way, don't forget to laugh at yourself. And, if you don't laugh at yourself, find a brother, like I have, who will make sure that you don't take yourself too seriously, even if you are the attorney general.

[Laughter.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: And then whether you are the attorney general or whether you're a lawyer, or whether you're a wonderful mother, reach out and help other people who surround you for your life.

I have loved public service. There is no money in the world that would ever be a substitute for the opportunities that I have had in public service, as a lawyer and a prosecutor, and as the attorney general.

Yes, you get your headlines in the newspaper, and people cuss at you and criticize you, and call you names, but when you realize that you've helped someone, that you've made a difference in lives, where you have helped a victim, or you have helped a lady get child support, then you know that all the criticism is worth the rewards.

But it's not just public service that will give you an opportunity to serve. Each one of us can make a difference in our community just by looking out for others. This school is a classic example, with some of your community service initiatives.

Recently I saw a mother volunteering at 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon at an elementary school, to help to teach other people's children how to read. A police officer was volunteering in the same school. She had already done one shift from 7:00 to 3:00, but on her own time she went to tutor youngsters.

An eighty-four-year-old man once told me that he volunteered three mornings a week for three hours each morning, and the teacher stood up and said, "He's the best that's happened to the kids in the class."

I don't care whether you're eight-four or eighteen, each one of us can make a difference and

touch the life of one other person.

[Applause.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Build community, become involved in your community in terms of working with the police, in the schools, to reweave the fabric of the community around the kids who are at risk and who are lost. Become involved.

Speak out against hatred and bigotry when you hear it. Haters are cowards. If you stand up to them, they back down. Make sure that you stand up and appreciate the diversity of your community, and speak out for the rights of all people, and let no one be the victim of bigotry and racism that can tear our community apart.

[Applause.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: "But," you say, "I want to be a businessman, I do want to make money." The best way you can make money in business is by putting people and your customers first, and therein you can help people.

You can make the best widget, you can build the best automobile, you can be the best air conditioner contractor, but if you do it the right way you are helping other people to make a difference.

Many of you are in science, and are probably going to be great scientists. Do not let the technology that has emerged in this century rule you; make sure that you rule the technology, and that you see that it is used to help others.

People are intimidated by the Internet, or by cyberspace; they don't know what to make of it. You in those areas of science can make sure that these new technologies are used to bring us together, to improve our lives, rather than to hurt us and tear us apart.

But, through it all, remember your most precious possession. I remember my afternoons after school, and in the evening and in the summertime, as my mother was building the house she also had time to teach us to play baseball, and bake cakes, to appreciate music, to love poetry.

She punished us, but she loved us with all of heart, and there is no child care in the world that will ever be the substitute for what that lady was in our lives.

I watch young parents now struggling to get their children off to school, to get to work, everybody gets home, homework is done, and people don't have quality time with their family.

And as you go out into this world, make sure that you put your family first, that you spend

time with your children, because they will be grown before you know it. Appreciate them and reach out and touch them, for you can truly, truly make a difference.

[Applause.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Raising children is the singlemost difficult thing I know to do. It takes hard work, love, intelligence, and an awful lot of luck, but it is probably the most singly rewarding thing that you can do, if you do it right.

In 1984, a friend died leaving me as the legal guardian of her fifteen-year-old twins, a boy and a girl. The girl was in love, and I've learned an awful lot about raising children in the last ten years.

[Laughter.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: But when I put her on the plane and sent her to college, and when she graduated cum laude in three years, and on each occasion she threw her arms around my neck and said, "Thank you, I couldn't have done it without you," those moments are as rewarding, or more rewarding, than anything I have done professionally.

So, as you leave this wonderful high school, take the spirit that I have found here every time I have been with you, from your school all around you, and go out into the world, and help other people to make a difference, to touch the lives of all.

God bless you as you do.

[Applause.]

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