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2 PAINT BRANCH HIGH SCHOOL  
3 COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES  
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10  
11 Friday, June 3, 1994  
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16 SPEAKER: THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL  
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20 D.A.R. Constitution Hall  
21 17th and D Streets, N.W.  
22 Washington, D.C.  
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## P R O C E E D I N G S

(10:45 a.m.)

MS. RENO: Thank you so very much and congratulations to the graduating class.

I have watched your faces for these past minutes and it has brought me back 38 years to a June day in Miami when I graduated from high school. I never dreamed I would be Attorney General of the United States. Ladies did not become lawyers in those days and sitting in this graduation, it has given me an opportunity to review my life and to share with you why I think I got here.

One of the most important lessons I learned I learned when I was about 10 years old. We lived in a little wooden house. There were four children in the family. My father did not make very much money and we were quickly outgrowing the house. My father did not have enough money to hire somebody to build a house.

One day my mother announced she was going to build a house, and we said, what do you know about building a house? She said, I am going to learn. She went to the brick mason, to the electrician, to the plumber, and she learned how to build a house. She dug the foundation with her own hands with a pick and shovel. She laid the block. She put in the electricity and the plumbing, and my father helped her with the heavy work

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1 when he came home from work at night.

2 She and I lived in that house until she died  
3 just before I came to Washington, and that house is still  
4 my home. It is a symbol to me every time I come down the  
5 driveway through the woods and see that house standing  
6 there. If I have a difficult problem to solve, a knotty  
7 problem to overcome, that house is a symbol to me that you  
8 can do anything you really want to if it is the right  
9 thing to do and you try hard enough.

10 But that house taught me a more important lesson  
11 in August of 1992 when Hurricane Andrew devastated the  
12 area. My mother was very old and ill, but she woke up at  
13 about 3 o'clock in the morning as the winds began to howl.  
14 She sat down in her chair totally unafraid. She listened  
15 to the wind crash and the trees crash around the house,  
16 but she was calm, for she knew how she had built that  
17 house. She had built it the right way. She had not cut  
18 corners. She had used the best materials. It is not a  
19 fancy house, but that house was built right.

20 When we came out at dawn, as the winds began to  
21 die, the outside looked like a World War I battlefield,  
22 all the trees were down, but the house had lost one  
23 shingle and some screens. It is a symbol to me. Don't  
24 get carried away with the glitz of the world. Build your  
25 life the right way and it will make a difference.

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1 (Applause.)

2 MS. RENO: Along the way after I started  
3 practicing law, I decided to run for the state  
4 legislature. I campaigned on principles that I felt  
5 strongly about, tried to do and act on what I believed to  
6 be right, and along the way a man who had taken a very  
7 unpopular political position years before told me, Janet,  
8 just keep on doing and saying what you believe to be  
9 right. Don't pussyfoot, don't equivocate, don't talk out  
10 of both sides of your mouth to make everybody happy.  
11 Stand up for what you believe in and you will wake up the  
12 next morning feeling good about yourself.

13 Well, I woke up the morning after my election  
14 not feeling entirely good because I had lost my election,  
15 but I remembered what that man had told me and it has  
16 stood me in good stead ever since. When I have to make  
17 decisions and people criticize me, I know that I have  
18 tried to do the right thing, that I have tried to prepare,  
19 and that I have tried to stand on principle.

20 It also helps to find that somebody had put a  
21 biography of Abraham Lincoln on my bedside table, and I  
22 learned that Abraham Lincoln had lost his first election.  
23 You will lose some challenges along the way, but pick  
24 yourself up and move along. It helps to know that a loss  
25 can be overcome.

1 Remember to stand up for principle. In this  
2 nation of great diversity, of traditions from all over the  
3 world represented in every part of this nation, it is time  
4 for us all to stand up and say that we must have an end to  
5 hate, to bigotry, to discrimination, and we must reach  
6 through our diversity, valuing the differences that bring  
7 us together as one on problems of mutual concern.

8 As I come to Washington, 1,000 miles away from  
9 Miami, an area I love, I remember the bay, the reefs where  
10 I have scuba-dived, the canals and the creeks through the  
11 Everglades, and it is a nation of great, but fragile  
12 beauty. Thirty-eight years ago those reefs were much  
13 clearer. That Everglades was alive and thriving and now I  
14 travel across the country and see what citizens of this  
15 country have done in less than 38 years to despoil this  
16 environment. You inherit a great challenge. Give to your  
17 children a land that is stronger and more vibrant in its  
18 environment than what you inherit.

19 But what has given me such strength in these  
20 last days and in this year in Washington are the people I  
21 have known, my classmates from elementary school, from  
22 high school who have kept in touch with me, people that I  
23 have known all my life, my first employer, my community,  
24 people who fussed at me but then have given me a hug as we  
25 have talked out our problems. Community is so important.

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1           You may become President of the United States.  
2           You may become Attorney General, but never forget where  
3           you came from. Never forget your neighborhood. People  
4           ask me why I speak at a high school graduation in the  
5           District of Columbia for Montgomery County, and I say  
6           because this is my community and I want to be a part and  
7           parcel of it. Never forget your neighborhood. Never  
8           forget your friends.

9           (Applause.)

10           MS. RENO: But the most important lesson I think  
11           that I have learned was learned about 9 or 10 years ago  
12           when a friend died leaving me as the legal guardian of her  
13           15-year old twins. They are now grown. They have done  
14           very well. But one of the most rewarding moments of my  
15           life was when I put that young lady on the plane to send  
16           her to college, and then three years later when I went to  
17           watch her graduate cum laude after three years. On both  
18           occasions she threw her arms around my neck and said,  
19           thank you, I could not have done it without you. That is  
20           as rewarding as any professional experience I have ever  
21           had.

22           To know that I was able to take my mother across  
23           this country on expeditions, even as she was old and  
24           frail, and that I did my duty by her is more important to  
25           me than anything that I have done. Never forget your

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1 family. They are your ultimate foundation and your  
2 strength.

3 (Applause.)

4 MS. RENO: You will reach your destiny and I  
5 hope that along the way it will be as fun, as interesting,  
6 sometimes as perplexing, sometimes as perilous as mine has  
7 been. It is an extraordinary future that lies before you.

8 God bless you all.

9 (Applause.)

10 (Whereupon, at 10:55 a.m., the speech was  
11 concluded.)

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