

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
OF JANET RENO, LL.B.,
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES,
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HILBERT COLLEGE
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HAMBURG, NEW YORK
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P-R-O-C-E-E-D-I-N-G-S

MS. RENO: Thank you, Congressman Quinn, for that warm welcome. I have really enjoyed my opportunity to work with you in Washington, and you always deliver, and your description of Hilbert has come true.

There is a great sense of community and great sense of pride in education, of pride in the community. Thus, I am very honored to be here with you today as you celebrate this very special time in your life.

From this community where many of you were born, from this wonderful college where you have come to learn, from the friends, family, and faculty that have touched your life, you will draw strength and courage and wisdom for the rest of your life.

Three years ago I came to Washington to accept one of the greatest challenges that anyone could undertake. But I was not alone, for there were memories or messages with me from people who have touched my life. Elementary school teachers who I had in second and third grade called or wrote. I heard from my baby-sitter, my American history teacher, from childhood friends, from police officers I had known, all encouraging me, supporting me, and reminding me of the community that raised me.

So as you leave this wonderful institution today, stop and cherish the people who have touched your lives, the faculty that's made a difference, the family that's sacrificed for you, the friends that 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 receive here, be yourself. Don't become known for how much money you make or for the house that you live in, but become known for yourself, who you are, what you stand for, and how you help others.

And there are so many, many, many people in this nation that need the help of all Americans, and there are so many problems to be addressed. There are children and families at risk and in peril. More children in America are alone and without adult supervision than at perhaps any

time in our history. More children are hungry now than in past years. More children have no structure in their lives.

As America is more mobile, as we move from one community to another to adapt to changing economics, as single parents try to raise their children under difficult circumstances, as both parents work trying to make ends meet, our children in too many instances have lost a sense of community. And we have seen the result.

Although violence is down in America, youth violence is up, up in a staggering way since 1985. Beginning in 1985, the crack epidemic hit America. We saw youth violence begin to rise. That, despite the fact that the number of young people in America in the teenage years was declining. But since 1992, the number of people in those years is beginning to increase and will increase significantly in the next 20 years. So unless we do something about youth violence now, we will never be able to really address the problem of violence in this nation. And if it's not youth violence, it's drugs or dropouts or teen pregnancy or family violence.

Some say, "It's not my problem. That's across town. That's somebody else's family. That's somebody else's parish. It's not my problem." But America must come together and recognize that it's everybody's problem.

When I was trying to figure out as a prosecutor in Miami what to do about crack-involved infants and their mothers, whether to prosecute them, how to handle the cases, what to do, the doctors took me to our large public hospital to try to figure out what to do.

They showed me the neonatal unit where crack babies were being cared for. Many had been there for six weeks. They had not been held or talked to except when changed or fed; they were not beginning to respond to human emotions. But across the nursery there would be a child with severe birth defects but with both parents with her as much as possible around the clock, who, despite her pain, was beginning to respond to human emotions because she had had parents who nurtured her and formed a bond with her.

The doctors then told me that 50 percent of all learned human response is learned in the first year of life, that the concept of reward and punishment and a conscience is developed during those years.

We have got to reweave the fabric of community and society around the children. Because we won't have enough prisons 18 years from now unless we invest in children today.

Those of you in business administration will not have a workforce that can fill the jobs in your company that can maintain America as a first-rate nation. Health care institutions will be brought to their knees because we failed to provide preventative medical care. It is everybody's problem in America.

But you may ask, "How can I help others? The problems seem so huge. This nation seems so big, so overwhelming, how can I make a difference?"

You can reach out and touch others. Think about the people who helped you get to where you're at today and just realize that people brought you here. Set a new course of service and community building. I see a new spirit across America in all our people, a spirit of caring, a can-do spirit, a spirit of giving, a spirit that builds communities. Join in that spirit of idealism that made this country great.

I don't mean for a moment that you should be naive, but we were founded by idealists with tough 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 country that provides more freedom and more opportunity than any country in the history of the world. They took the hard way, and they made a difference.

But some Americans sit on the sidelines and snipe and harp at their government. They don't participate. If our form of government, if government of the people, by the people, and for the people is to prevail in this nation, then the people, all of us, not just a few, must be a part of that government, in some way or another, and contribute positively, whether it be public service or just plain voting.

I think public service is one of the great callings I know. Granted, you get fussed at, cussed at, and your name ends up in the papers when you don't want it to, but there is no greater undertaking than to try to make things better for other people and to make government work for its people in a compassionate and effective way.

I have worked in the private sector and in public service, and no money I could ever make in the private sector could ever substitute for the satisfaction of public service. As a prosecutor in Miami, I collected child support, and I would receive a call on a Sunday night from a mother who couldn't pay her rent the next day who was angry. I kept my telephone number listed just so I could hear from people. And she would give me what for, and it would be frustrating because I knew we had tried our best, but then she'd see me in six weeks and give me a pat on the back and thank me for making a difference.

I have sat with victims whose loved ones were killed in a homicide, unable, for the moment, to solve the crime, taking their tears on my shoulder, trying to comfort them and trying to explain what was happening, and there was frustration, but then as the case evolved, as we were able to apprehend the guilty and prosecute and convict and see an appropriate sentence imposed, you knew that public service was working.

And not just in terms of punishment. I will always remember the man who stopped me in a

downtown office building in Miami and tapped me on the shoulder and said, "I want to thank you." And I turned around and said, "For what?" He said, "You prosecuted me." I said, "Well, you're the first person that ever thanked me for prosecuting them." He said, "You prosecuted me, but you and your prosecutors got me in a drug treatment program. I've been drug free for two years. I got my family back. I've got a job, and thank you."

But service by itself is not just public service. It is more. Public service may be government service, but there are countless other ways that you can serve.

In your parish. Yesterday in Sacramento I met a young man from a Catholic high school that had a requirement of community service. He was volunteering in an after-school program at a local public school. He was a typical teenager, and I came up to him, and I asked him what he thought about public service and community service, and he said in his kind of shy, teenage way, "Well, it's okay. I guess I kind of like it. I can see them start to read a little better when I help them, and they really are neat, and it's real nice to be asked where I was when I didn't show up one day. I help them fix their bikes, and, yeah, I like it. I feel like I'm helping."

Or the mom from the neighborhood who is there, who wanted to volunteer to make a difference in her child's school. I remember the 84-year-old man at home in Miami who stood up and said to me, "Do you know what I do three hours each morning -- three hours a morning, three mornings a week?" I said, "No, sir. I don't." He said, "Do you know how old I am?" I said, "No." He said, "I'm 84, and I volunteer as a teacher's aide in the first grade." And a young woman stood up. She had been seated next to him, and she said, "I'm the first grade teacher for whom he volunteers, and the gifted kids can't wait for their time with him because he expands their horizons beyond anything that I have the time to do. And the children with learning disabilities find he has the patience of Joab, and they can't wait for their time with him."

Whether we be 84 or 18, everybody can make a difference in this country. The business leader who becomes a partner with the public school, the business leader who gives a young person an opportunity in the school for work program. Every single American can make a difference through community service.

So, believe in yourself. Be idealistic. Sure, it's easy to be a cynic. The cynic knows so much about what's wrong and why it cannot be fixed, but I urge you not to listen to the cynics and those that carp at government. Believe in our capacity to make the government work; believe in our capacity to make a difference.

But service by itself is not enough. So many times we go in different directions as we serve and we don't come together as a whole. We must, with our service, rebuild communities and reweave the fabric of community around those that are weak and frail and at risk. We see so many examples of how it can be done. You can work with your city commission, with the town

council to improve the cohesion of services, to bring together volunteers as public servants.

Community policing is a classic example. Congressman Quinn has talked about the President's initiative as Congress joined with him in putting a hundred thousand community police officers on the streets of America. I've had the chance to see those officers in action. I've seen them reach out to citizens in the neighborhood, not to impose their will, but to involve them in identifying problems, establishing priorities, and working together to get to solutions.

I've seen them reach out to young people who are about to get into gangs, and by their mentoring force pulled them back and get them into positive pursuits. I have seen them tutor youngsters in afternoon programs after they finish their daily shift. I've seen them reach out to teachers and heart specialists and business people to begin to stitch the fabric of community around kids and families at risk.

Work with your schools and police. The police cannot do it by themselves, and the schoolteacher can't do it by herself, but if we work together in developing tutoring programs that make sure our kids don't fall behind, if we work together to develop conflict resolution programs that teach our youngsters how to resolve conflicts without knives or guns and fists, we can make a difference.

Work with schools policing parks. Has it ever bothered you as you look at children wandering the streets afternoons after they have been let out of school with no one supervising them and you wish there was a facility, and then you drive past the school, and the school is closed? Let's open our schools, bring in our police, bring in our teachers; let us come together and make sure those vulnerable afternoon and evening hours are supervised for our children who are on the streets of America.

Let us work together in domestic violence initiatives. Again, Congress and the President worked so hard together to pass the Violence Against Women Act. Some people used to tell me in criminal justice that's a just a domestic. My point is that unless we end the violence in the home in this nation, we are never going to end it on the streets and in the schools of this land. Each state has received grants that more money will be coming now that Congress has passed the resolution to begin funding for this year, so there will be significant grants to states.

As you go back to your community, whether you be the person in human service or a graduate in the criminal justice program or just a person who's going to be involved in developing their own business, talk to your city council. Say, let's see what we can do about domestic violence. Let's see how the local emergency room can join with the criminal justice system and with other specialists in doing something about it up front. Let's get the community police officers to identify the families at risk for domestic violence and involve counseling programs that can make a difference, but reach out and figure out how to knit the fabric of community back together again.

Businessmen should have to consider what they are going to do to free parents' time to go to their children's schools. School teachers tell me the single greatest problem they have is getting parents to the schools because they have to work. Let's make sure we form a true partnership.

Let us form a partnership to clean up the neighborhood that bothers us, make a difference in the vacant lot, to clean up the stream. That is happening in America through people that care.

But for all that you do to use this degree, for all the service you commit to your community, remember that the most precious possession is your family.

I learned an important lesson from my mother when I was about ten years old. We lived in a little wooden house. There were four children in the family, and we were quickly outgrowing it. My father did not have enough money to hire somebody to build a bigger house, and one afternoon my mother announced that she was going to build a house. And we all said, "What do you know about building a house?" She said, "I'm going to learn." She went to the brick mason. She went to the plumber, the electrician, and she found out how to build a house. And she came home, and she dug the foundation with her own hands with a pick and shovel. She laid the block. She put in wiring and plumbing, and my father would help with the heavy work when he came home from work at night.

She and I lived in that house until she died just before I came to Washington. Every time I came down the driveway through the woods and saw that house standing there, it was symbol that you can do anything you really want to if it's the right thing to do and you put your mind to it.

But that house taught me an even more important lesson in August of 1992, as Hurricane Andrew went fast through the area. About three o'clock in the morning, the winds began to howl. My mother got up, sat down in her chair, folded her hands. She was totally unafraid. You could hear the trees cracking around the house, but she knew how she had built that house. She put in the right materials. She built it the right way. She hadn't cut corners.

When we went out in the morning, it looked like a World War I battlefield. All the trees were down in this gray mist, but the house only lost one shingle and some screens.

Build your life the right way and build your children's lives the right way. For she taught us to play fair. She taught us to play baseball, bake cakes, and she taught us to appreciate music and love poetry. She punished us, and she loved us with all her heart. And no child care in the world will ever be a substitute for what that lady was in our life.

Raising children is the single most difficult job in the world. It takes hard work, love, a lot of luck, and intelligence, but it is the most rewarding of all experiences. I know. Although never

married, I inherited as legal guardian 15-year-old twins, a boy and a girl. The girl was in love, and I learned an awful lot about raising children in the last 12 years.

When I sent that young lady off to college and when I saw her graduate in three years cum laude and on each occasion she threw her arms around my neck and said, "Thank you. I couldn't have done it without you," that is as important to me, that moment, as any in my professional career.

So let us concentrate on how to establish our businesses, work at our jobs, serve our community, contribute to others while at the same time making sure we put our children first.

I've had an opportunity in these few years to travel across many places in America, from huge cities to small towns and rural counties to Indian reservations to inner cities. I have never ever so deeply believed in America as I do now. I never ever had such a profound belief in the strength in the idealism of the American people as I do now.

And when I come to a college like Hilbert and I see so many people so interested in their education and what they can do with it and how they can serve and what they can contribute, you make me even surer that we will prevail and that we will, building communities across America, take back our communities for our children, child by child, family by family, block by block, city by city and give them a strong and positive future.

Go with God.