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SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

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16 OnCenter Building

17 800 South State Street

18 Syracuse, New York

19 May 17, 1998

20 3:48 PM

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1                   Syracuse University Commencement Address

2                   MS. RENO: Thank you very much,

3                   Dean. It is a great privilege, an honor to be here

4                   today. It was 35 years ago that I stood in your

5                   shoes. I didn't know what to expect. The future

6                   seemed uncertain. I certainly never expected to

7                   be Attorney General or have my wattles focused on on

8                   the Ally McBeal show, but it's been a wonderful

9                   experience.

10                  And I can tell you particularly after

11                  these last five years of watching lawyers in action

12                  across this country, lawyers helping people,

13        developing new systems, volunteering, trying to make  
14        things better for America, that I am very proud to be  
15        a lawyer in the United States. I love the law. I  
16        love good lawyers, and I've met some good lawyers  
17        here today in this graduating class. You will take  
18        so much from this law school that will be with you  
19        all of your professional career.  
20        You'll find yourself telling stories about  
21        faculty members just as I did this past weekend;  
22        faculty members that have influenced your life and  
23        will forever. You'll take concepts of the law with  
24        you that will hold you in good stead no matter what  
25        you do. Use the wonderful tools you obtain here.

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2           Use them, I urge you, in public service at some  
3           point.

4                   The chancellor has spoken of my feelings  
5           about public service, and sometimes it does get a  
6           little bit rough, but I haven't figured out anything  
7           I'd rather do than to try to use the law to help  
8           people. I caution you as you consider public service  
9           that sometimes it's frustrating. You don't think  
10          you're getting anything done or it seems to go so  
11          slow. In 1968 I represented a lady in a child  
12          support matter. She came asking me to collect child  
13          support. I quoted her a fee, and she said, "how can

14       you expect me to pay you? I can't even pay the  
15       rent. I haven't gotten child support in nine  
16       months." And I felt so bad about asking her that I  
17       immediately said, "forget it." But it made me  
18       realize that as a lawyer we had to work harder to  
19       develop a system for a collection of child support  
20       that wouldn't put that woman or others similarly  
21       situated in the same position. And so when I became  
22       the state attorney, we developed, along with others,  
23       a child support enforcement system that provided a  
24       public way to collect child support.

25                   Now, if you think public service is really

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2           interesting and really rewarding, you might get a  
3           call at 7 o'clock on a Sunday night. I always left  
4           my home telephone number listed. "You haven't gotten  
5           my child support yet and I'm going to get evicted,  
6           and it's all your fault," bang -- from mothers telling me  
7           how their children were doing without because I  
8           hadn't collected child support. And yet, about two  
9           years ago I drove down an old dirt road in South  
10          Carolina with the President of the United States,  
11          past the spot where a church had been burdened. We  
12          drove to dedicate the new church. The president  
13          spoke, we came down off the platform and a lady

14 suddenly burst through the rope line. "Janet, you  
15 got me child support in Miami." And she then said,  
16 "and these are the two young men you got child  
17 support for." And looking at those young men beaming  
18 down at me, seeing how they had grown, it's one of  
19 the ways that you help people, and it's one of the  
20 moments that you always remember.

21 Public service is hard, as John Kennedy  
22 said, but it's worth it all. But even if you decide  
23 not to go into public service, whether you're a real  
24 estate lawyer, a trial lawyer, or have a small family  
25 practice, you might do other things with the law.

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2       You might leave the law, but I believe a good  
3       education does more than produce just good lawyers.  
4       It also builds good citizens, men and women who can  
5       work harder, think more clearly, communicate more  
6       effectively, analyze better, negotiate more  
7       productively, and spot and solve problems better than  
8       most any other discipline.

9                   I did an inventory of what lawyers might  
10      do. They help lead Fortune 500 corporations.  
11      They're entrepreneurs like the founders of Southwest  
12      Airlines and David's Cookies. They teach English and  
13      kindergarten. They founded Direct Advocacy  
14      Associations, Humane Societies, charities and

15 investment banks. They write novels and  
16 screenplays. They are dancers and disk jockeys,  
17 sculptors, restaurateurs, ministers and parents, and  
18 they even raise llamas. And if you are not satisfied  
19 with any of those things, remember that Tony Laruso  
20 managed the Oakland A's to a World Series  
21 Championship in 1989, and he is a lawyer. But  
22 wherever you go, whatever you do in the law, use it  
23 to help others. I see the law having three  
24 functions; one is as the sword and the shield, the  
25 advocate and the protector; the second is as the

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2       problem solver, a function too often neglected by  
3       lawyers; the third is a peacemaker. A lawyer can be  
4       a extraordinarily effective peacemaker.

5                   In these roles as you approach  
6       whatever you're going to do with the law or out of  
7       the law, consider two issues that I think are vital  
8       for lawyers to address. First, the issue of access  
9       to justice: How do we make the law real for all  
10      Americans? If 80 percent of the poor and working  
11      poor have no access to lawyers, to the Courts or to  
12      justice, what does the law mean to them? For too  
13      many, it means nothing more than the paper it's  
14      written on.

15                    Now, some of you may say, I'm going up to  
16                    Wall Street and I'm going to be a big corporate  
17                    lawyer and that's not my problem. You may raise  
18                    llamas and say it's not your problem. I suggest to  
19                    you that if you do that you will undermine the law,  
20                    undermine your community and contribute to a problem  
21                    that I think we must address. If people do not feel  
22                    that they have a voice in the law, if they feel they  
23                    have no remedies, if they feel alienated, then the  
24                    democracy of which they are a part of is weakened.  
25                    It is impaired, and it is not a representative of all

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2 the people. We are all in this together, and we as  
3 lawyers, no matter what course we take in the future,  
4 have a duty to make sure that America has access to  
5 justice.

6 I would begin in one of the most important  
7 areas of all, indigent defense. In too many states  
8 in this country, defendants who have no money to pay  
9 a lawyer, are receiving little, if any, defense. Too  
10 many people face serious penalties, including the  
11 death penalty, without adequate defense. Some people  
12 say, "but that used to happen, we don't see innocent  
13 people charged." The Justice Department did a study  
14 of over 16 cases in which in recent years a defendant  
15 was sentenced, convicted and sentenced for a crime

16 that DNA testing demonstrated they did not commit.  
17 We have seen other instances in cases in which the  
18 death penalty was requested when the person didn't  
19 commit the crime. One innocent person convicted is  
20 one too many. And if we are to make this system of  
21 justice we hold dear real, we've got to make sure  
22 that at least we do not deprive people of liberty  
23 without adequate defense.

24 If you become the investment banker and  
25 are indeed on Wall Street, or if you're the lawyer

2 with the family practice here in Syracuse, all of us  
3 have a responsibility to speak out for legal service  
4 programs across this country, for they are the heart  
5 of making sure that America has access. But each of  
6 us in our own ways perform pro bono service, and I  
7 suggest to you that we can be more effective and  
8 cover a lot more ground if we consider how we perform  
9 pro bono service. We can go in like the advocate,  
10 take the one case and think we can really solve the  
11 problem, or we can really solve the problem. Let me  
12 give you an example. Suppose a lawyer undertakes pro  
13 bono representation of a tenant who wants the  
14 landlord to fix the unit that the tenant lives in,  
15 but the landlord says, "the crack dealers down the

16 street have driven all my tenants away. I don't have  
17 any money. I'm losing rent. I don't have money to  
18 fix it. I feel bad about it, I'm sorry." Why not  
19 take the whole apartment building? Why not take the  
20 whole neighborhood and go to the local authorities to  
21 see what community redevelopment monies may be  
22 available. Contact the senior partner who is the  
23 Chairman of the United Way Campaign and say, "hey,  
24 look, this whole neighborhood is in need of  
25 rehabilitation." Contact the local Habitat for

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2 Humanity, and instead of working on one house, work

3 on one house as part of a whole neighborhood so that  
4 you create a domino effect and solve problems with  
5 respect to a neighborhood as opposed to one unit of  
6 an apartment. Trouble with the crack dealers down  
7 the street? Go to the police chief and talk about  
8 what community policing could do in that  
9 neighborhood, to involve the citizens and bring  
10 order, and to bring a force that can address quality  
11 of life issues. Go to the local medical community  
12 and find out how we can join together in a  
13 partnership that will ensure medical care for  
14 families that cannot afford preventative medical care  
15 for their children, but use the ability of lawyers as  
16 problem solvers to make a difference.

17                   And then that leads to the second point;  
18           lawyers have a responsibility to build a community.  
19           It's fine to go in and represent one child, 14 years  
20           old, charged with a delinquent act and get them off.  
21           But how did that child get there? I used to look at  
22           presentence investigations of armed robberies. I  
23           could see four points along the way where we could  
24           have intervened in that child's life to have made a  
25           difference, but there was no advocate. There was no

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2           lawyer there looking at the whole picture. We were

3       only looking at individual cases.

4                   And then the crack epidemic hit Miami, and

5       I went to the doctors at our public hospital to try

6       to figure out what to do about crack-involved infants

7       and their mothers. And they taught me that 50

8       percent of all learned human response is learned in

9       the first year of life. The concept of reward and

10       punishment in the consciousness is developed in the

11       first three years of life. And I said to myself,

12       what good are all the prisons and detention

13       facilities going to be 15 and 18 years from now if

14       that child doesn't know what punishment means? What

15       good are all the education opportunities going to be

16       if that child does not have the foundation upon which

17 to learn? We have got to make an investment in our  
18 children in terms of time and money and structures,  
19 and lawyers can lead the way in looking at the whole  
20 picture as opposed to an individual picture to help  
21 solve problems. Lawyers as advocates can make sure  
22 that we have a system for delivering medical care to  
23 every child; for ensuring that we can solve  
24 parenting through child support mechanisms; through  
25 efforts aimed as domestic violence; through parenting

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2 skills courses; and through conflict resolution  
3 programs that help bring peace within a family. Let

4 us make sure that every child in America has  
5 appropriate educare in those first three years so  
6 that we build on a strong foundation for K  
7 through 12.

8 Now, when I came to Washington for my  
9 confirmation hearing and started talking like this,  
10 somebody said, "you sound like a social worker." I  
11 don't care what we are. We should be problem solvers  
12 for the people we serve and for the communities in  
13 which we live. We should argue that teachers should  
14 start being paid salaries that represent the strength  
15 of their profession and the importance of their  
16 profession.

17 As problem solvers, yes, we should worry

18 about representing that 14 and 17 year old defendant,  
19 but we should let the world understand that if we're  
20 really going to solve the problem, we should have had  
21 something in the afternoons and evenings and  
22 summertimes for that 17 year old to have done when he  
23 was eight and started getting in trouble when  
24 children are more unsupervised than at any time in  
25 history. And we need to develop job-to-work programs

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2 that prepare our young people so that it will enable  
3 them to obtain a skill to earn a living wage. We've

4 got to give our young people, all of our young people,  
5 the opportunity to serve. This class has  
6 distinguished itself in its public service and in its  
7 public interest work, but there are so many young  
8 people that want to be somebody, that want to make a  
9 difference and don't know how because they have no  
10 strong role model, no mentor. Each of us can make a  
11 difference by being a mentor to a young person who  
12 does not have someone to lead them.

13 But where it all begins is in the family.

14 I remember my Aunt Louise after school and in the  
15 evening and my mother who worked at home. My mother taught  
16 us to play baseball and to bake a cake and to  
17 appreciate Beethoven's symphonies. She loved us with

18 all her heart, and she punished us. She taught us to  
19 play fair. No child care in the world will ever beat  
20 the substitute for what that lady was in our life.  
21 Somehow or another -- somehow or another we ought to  
22 be able to pursue our career aspirations, be the  
23 lawyer we want to be, practice law in a sensible way,  
24 not get caught up with billable hours, and have  
25 quality time with children. With modern computers,

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2 with telecommuting, with the way things are done now  
3 we ought to use the technology of today to give us  
4 time to be with children.

5                   Raising children is the single most  
6           difficult thing I know to do. It takes hard work,  
7           love, intelligence and an awful lot of luck, but it  
8           is the most rewarding, as I learned when I inherited  
9           15 year old twins when both their parents died and  
10          I became their legal guardian. The girl was in love.  
11          I've learned an awful lot about raising children in  
12          the last 12 years, but it is one of the most rewarding  
13          things. When you go looking for jobs in the future,  
14          ask: "what is your attitude about family leave time,  
15          about quality time with families?" Make sure you put  
16          that in the equation of success.

17                   One final challenge: I think lawyers  
18          are going to be in a better position to help achieve

19 than any other discipline that I know -- teaching  
20 America to resolve conflicts, not just with trials  
21 but with negotiations and means of dispute  
22 resolution. Not with guns and fists and arguments  
23 and knives, but talking it out in the elementary  
24 school. Not with bully sticks and harsh words, but  
25 with a police officer who knows by the tone of voice

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2 and manner and an ability to communicate and to  
3 listen, how to talk with young people and make a  
4 difference. Law firms, bar associations across the

5 country are beginning to reach out and teach conflict  
6 resolution. If we work hard at this, when you stand  
7 up here 35 years from now you can say that you helped  
8 lead the way to bringing America to a more peaceful  
9 culture, a culture of respect, a culture where people  
10 listen, a culture where people talk and look and  
11 understand instead of looking past and through in  
12 argument and in division.

13 It is such an extraordinary time in  
14 history, a time of challenge, a time where technology  
15 threatens to master us unless we master it, but  
16 having talked to a number of your colleagues just  
17 before the commencement, I have every, every faith  
18 that you're going to do it. And when I hear 35 years

19       from now what you've done, I'll be as proud then as I  
20       am now of all that you have done.

21                               (Proceedings concluded)

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