



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE**

**REMARKS OF HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL**

**RACE, ETHNICITY AND THE LAW:**

**CHALLENGES FACING THE LEGAL PROFESSION**

**Tuesday, June 8, 1999**

**5:08 p.m.**

**P R O C E E D I N G S**

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you, Judy.

My thanks to the panelists and everybody who participated.

The issue of diversity is one of the most vital that this Nation faces. If you look at it very clearly, democracy is at stake. Our rule of law, as we have known it, is at stake. A profession that does not reflect the diversity that is America will not be able to speak for America or represent America, all America, or serve all America effectively.

Such diversity is important not for its own sake, but to enable us to reap the wonderful sense of innovation, the understanding, the skills, the insight that represent all of the people of America.

I think what we've heard today is about people, not just some of the people in America, but all of the people. How do we give all of the people access to the law? How do we make the law represent all of the people? And what is the answer if we don't?

Yes, Judy is right, it is important to note that we have made considerable progress. But we have so much more to do. And unless we do it, we are going to see a part of the Nation disenfranchised, angry, alienated, and at odds with us. We are going to see a nation whose strength is sapped, whose honor and ability is not what we have known it to be. This is one of the most important undertakings we can pursue.

And where do we start? It's not fair to look at the law schools or the law firms when we have done a lousy job of giving all of the children of America a chance to grow in a strong and positive way.

We cannot wait to mentor kids in high school. We have got to build a legal system that represents all of the children of America from the time they are brought into this world, and we have got to give them equal opportunity. But not just equal opportunity in terms of programs, equal opportunity in terms of understanding, an ability to communicate and talk with them and encourage them and give them a sense of the future and the sense of what they can be when they grow up. And the sense that what we see in first-graders or third-graders can truly make a difference.

They are so wise. They have such a sense of equity, such a sense of right and wrong. They want the law to be what they think it should be. Let's not let them lose that magic moment, when they ask you, as a third-grader, Ms.Reno, what happens when somebody breaks into your house and your daddy shoots them? Well, what happens if they're just at the window? Well, your daddy can't shoot them.

Well, that makes sense, because they weren't going to hurt you if they didn't get in. They have such knowledge that I think attorneys general and judges should sometimes trade places with them and understand better.

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: But there is a group in America that we must reach out to if we are ever, ever going to change this system. And that is the category of young men, 18 to 35, who have been in custody in the system, have been subjected to the correctional system. If they have paid their dues, we've got to give them the chance to grow in a strong and positive way and become involved and become part of

our Nation, and not sit on the sidelines with an albatross wrapped around their necks, enabling them never to move forward. They have such a sense of innovation.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: They have a drive. They have an understanding. And we can make a difference. But we're going to have to change sentencing policy to reflect the fact that people are coming back to the community. And if this Nation is to be strong, we must make it work for all.

Law school, Justice Department, law firms, all have a special responsibility in trying to figure out who the good lawyer is going to be. It's not going to be just test scores. It's not going to be just grades. It's going to sometimes be the lawyer who knows how to talk to the jury in ways that law schools can't test with grades and test scores. It's going to be how a person handles themselves.

I used to ask, what is your opinion of the death penalty, when I interviewed somebody. And they'd knee-jerk and say, oh, I'm for it. Why? It's a deterrent. Why do you think it's a deterrent? Well, I just think it must be.

What is your opinion of the death penalty? I'm against it. And then follow the very well-reasoned statement as to why he was against it.

Those answers can reflect more about a person and their ability to be a lawyer and to serve the people. A lawyer who is interested in problem-solving, in trust-building, in serving the people, in solving their problems oftentimes can't be tested and can't be graded. It's real life that we're talking about. And that's why diversity is so important.

The issue of trust has come out. Why would somebody want to be a lawyer if they didn't trust the system? We've got to turn that around.

And the way we turn it around is enabling lawyers to serve people, by teaching them how to solve problems-- people problems. Why is that toilet falling in from the ceiling above into the kitchen below, and why can't I get the landlord to fix it? Why can't I get that car out of that vacant lot? Why can't I get that crack house down? Why can't

I get help for my kid who has a drug problem? Why do I have to wait till he gets arrested?

How we serve all of the people, how I help that person with social security for her elderly parent when it's tied up in knots that we can't understand, how do we help that immigrant who is in a backlog of Naturalization systems, how can we serve all of the people of America?

There is a statement on the Ninth Street east wall of the Justice Building. It says: The common law is derived from the will of mankind, issuing from the people, framed through mutual confidence, sanctioned by the light of reason.

If the law is that-- and I think it's a wonderful description of it-- it will never be framed by mutual confidence if a significant portion of the people are standing off, angry, alienated, distrusting, and unserved. It will never be sanctioned and the light will not inform because these people will not think that the law is reasonable.

We are here because we care, because we care about the rule of law, we care about our democracy, we care about this Nation. Let us go forth from here and use the wonderful ideas that you've heard today and that you have generated here today. Not just today and tomorrow, but for the rest of our lives, to make this Nation a nation of all its people, strong and proud and free and trusting and serving each other to make this a better land.

Thank you all. And now, the reception will take place at the Gewirz Hall, directly across S Street from this building, on the 12th floor.

Thank you all so very much.

[Standing ovation.]

[Whereupon, at 5:17 p.m., the remarks were concluded.]