



The Speech of
United States Attorney General
Janet Reno
at the
Big Brothers and Big Sisters
National Conference
Marriott Hotel
540 North Michigan Avenue
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June 23, 1999
12:00 o'clock p.m.

MS. RENO: Thank you, Lydia, and thank you all. To all of you here, I salute you, and I give to you the gratitude of all America for what you do for children. What you do for young people is vital not just to their lives, but to the life of this nation.

For almost 100 years since 1904, Big Brothers Big Sisters have reached out to the children of America and made a profound difference in their lives and given them a strong and positive future. You have led thousands of children out of misery and despair and into a strong and positive day.

I've tried to talk with kids who have been in trouble or who are in trouble and ask them what could have been done to prevent it, and time and again it comes back to a poignant message, somebody to talk to, somebody who understands how to talk to young people, somebody who understands how hard it is to grow up in the United States today, somebody who can give me a pat on the back when I deserve it and a stiff talking to when I deserved it.

Now you have 514 local affiliates bringing adult mentors together with children in more than 5,000 communities across this nation. I know full well that helping others is not easy. Sometimes, despite your best efforts, you fail, and it is heartbreaking, but you all don't give up.

And the second thing you all do is set an example for all service organizations in terms of the quality and the excellence you are constantly dedicated to. You put so much into recruiting. You put so much into training. You put so much into making sure that you do it the right way, and I just want to congratulate you for that.

It is easy to go out and try to help thinking you know what's best, but when you have the objectivity and the caring concern to do it right, I salute you, and I express again the gratitude of the nation. You're not afraid to have your work evaluated, and one factor's certain, the evaluations make clear what you are doing is working.

Compared to similar children without a Big Brother or a Big Sister, children who meet regularly are less likely to start using drugs, less likely to start drinking, less likely to skip a day of school and less likely to engage in violent behavior. These youths also have better relationships with their peers and stronger connections to family members.

People ask me why crime is down six years in a row. People ask me why teen pregnancies are falling in this country. People ask me why more people are graduating from high school, and they think that we make claims. I give the credit to people like you and to the federation and to what

it is doing across this nation, in league with others, for giving children a strong and positive future.

What impresses me, though, is that you're not satisfied with your excellence. You're not satisfied with the number you serve. You're constantly trying to figure out how you can do it better, and you're constantly trying to make sure, by the commitment that you've made to doubling the number of youngsters that you will be mentoring by the year 2000, that we can and must do more.

I salute you, and I say thank you from all America because you are making a difference, not just in the lives of children you care about, but in the life of the nation. I would like especially to thank Ted McKenna because in the time that you have been involved in mentoring, you have made mentoring a success by your willingness to have this program evaluated, by your willingness to learn from it, by your willingness to take your experience and service and effect a framework that people can rely on.

You have made the institution of mentoring a permanent fixture, I think, in American life. I'm going to miss you very, very much. And I know your charge will be in good hands in Ms. Bredenburgh's care, and I look forward to working with you in every way I can. I say special thanks to the award-winners, some of whom I have met, because you represent the very best of an already splendid institution in America. To all of you, the volunteers, the board members, the directors and the affiliates, just thank you, thank you, thank you.

I think you probably work as hard as you do and care as much as you do just because of your concern for humanity, your compassion, your caring. But I just want you all to understand how important it is to America in terms of what you have done, particularly in the last 25 years in this country. Think about it for a moment. In these last 25 years, more and more families have both parents working. More and more families have a single parent. More and more children are confronted with guns and bullies and bigotry. More and more children feel alone and at sea in this world that is more complex than ever before.

What is the magnitude of the problem? There are about 28 million children between the ages of 10 and 17 in the United States. That's just between 10 and 17. About 13.6 million of these youth are defined as at risk of behavioral problems. Roughly half, or about 7 million, are considered very high risk and share a propensity for delinquency, sexual activity, substance abuse, underachievement.

According to a study conducted by the Carnegie Foundation, many adolescents spend 40 percent of their time -- 40 percent of their time -- either alone without adult supervision or with peers who have a negative influence on them. Some people say, "But crime is down six years in a row. You told us it was getting better." But then you see the specter of Littleton, our children shot on the streets of Washington, and you understand we have so very, very much to do.

We have, though, an opportunity that is rare in this nation. We have a moment in history where, if we renew our efforts, enhance our efforts, expand the number of people we serve and come together in our communities across this nation, we can change the face of this nation, not just for the generation to come, but for generations to come.

We have too long, for too long accepted violence as a way of life in our communities. We don't have to do that anymore. We have shown that we can bring crime down one year after another to balance prevention, intervention and enforcement programs. We have shown that we can reduce teen pregnancy. We have shown that we can increase aptitudes and test scores so that children can be prepared for the future.

But we have a tendency to become complacent in this country, to think that we've done it so we're going to change our focus to other areas. If we keep the focus on and intensify our focus on our children, we can make a difference. Ladies and gentlemen, the people in this room can end the culture of violence in this country. It doesn't have to be.

Toronto is right across the border. It's a city of about the same size as the city we're in. Between about 1992 and 1997, there were 100 gun homicides in Toronto. There were some 3,000 gun homicides here. Gun homicides don't have to be, and we can take steps to see the country -- we can take steps that will make sure that not just the children we mentor, but most of America's children engage in problem-solving rather than dispute-creating, that they engage in resolving conflicts rather than solving them by knives and guns and fists, that they learn how to appreciate the diversity, the splendid diversity of America rather than engaging in discriminatory bigotry against those that are different from themselves.

We can make sure that America's children graduate from school with the skills necessary to fill the jobs that will maintain this nation as a first-rate nation and give these young people a chance to earn a living wage and be productive for their families. We can do it if we take the energy and the commitment that is represented in this room and move forward to make sure that our mentoring programs reach all youth who need support in their lives, the gang-related youth, the delinquents, the learning-disabled, the youth out of school, the youth in trouble who are angst-ridden and at sea and who need help.

In partnership with law enforcement, probation officers, judges, mental health providers, hospitals, faith-based schools and the corporate sector, we can complement the formal system's intervention in these children's lives and create a lasting, personal impact on children in America that will last long beyond the programs because it is based on people caring.

The Department of Justice wants to support your effort in every way they can. Through our Office of Criminal Justice and Delinquency Prevention, we're currently funding 163 juvenile mentoring programs, many of which are represented here. Through our funding formula, formula funding, we are supporting hundreds of additional mentoring programs.

This is the kind of funding and support that can help meet

the needs of our nation's youth. Through our research and evaluation of these programs, the Department of justice is also working to support you in creating quality programs. In fact, we have developed an evaluation manual which you can use in collecting and analyzing data about your local program to check the quality of your program and make adjustments as you learn.

The national evaluation for conducting of our JUMP programs will further add to the knowledge base the mentoring movement needs to assess how mentoring works in different settings and with different providers. How can we do better in Indian country? How can we shape something that reflects the tradition of Native Americans and do it the right way?

How can we serve a group along a certain area of town that is different and that wants to be part of a community? How can we reach out and cross boundaries and make sure that these people feel involved and a part of the community? The Department is also committed to providing mentoring programs with the support they need to grow some.

Our newly-established Mentoring Center, a partnership of Northwestern Regional Education Labs, public/private ventures and Big Brothers Big Sisters of America is providing the skills, the strategy and the information you need to recruit more volunteers, train quality staff, make more matches and find the resources you need.

The Center has a Web site with a wealth of information you can access, a newsletter with success stories, resource information and training opportunities to help you in your effort. Throughout the next year, the Center will offer a number of hands-on training programs and technical assistance which you can apply to your local organization.

I urge you to make use of the Center and our support in your ongoing work with volunteers and you and in your ongoing efforts to constantly strive to find out what is the best way to provide the support for young people that can have a lasting, positive impact.

But no matter how many children we reach out to, we shouldn't wait till those children are at risk. We should not wait till those children are in despair. We should not wait till those children are in the detention facilities, and God forbid, we shouldn't wait till those children lie dead on the streets of America.

Because of your experience, you know what it takes for a child to grow in a strong and positive way. You have seen the building blocks of children that you have mentored, building blocks in their lives missing, gaping holes in some lives, of the ingredients that could have made the difference.

We must all, the Department of Justice, everybody concerned, pull together in our communities across this nation and recognize that communities are going to be at the forefront in providing the fabric around children and families at risk. And beginning at the beginning, we've got to use the know-how in this room, the energy in this room to spark our communities in making sure that children are not at risk in the first place, that they come into this world with parents who have the skills to raise children, that they come into this world with parents who live at peace, where domestic violence is not a part of their life.

We've got to educate our communities to understand that the child who watches his father beat his mother comes to accept violence as a way of life, and if we're going to end risk for our children, we have got to start in the home at the beginning and say that domestic violence will not be tolerated. We've got to look hard at the figures that tell us that the child who is abused and neglected as a child comes to be the abuser and the criminal too often down the road.

Why wait for that to happen? Let us use the example of drug courts, which are now spreading across the country because we're giving judges the tools to do the job and the discretion to properly manage case loads, and build the best juvenile and child abuse and neglect courts in the nation so that judges have the resources they need to do the job, the training they need to do the job and make sure

that abuse and neglect is focused on immediately by skilled professionals and that steps are taken to see that it will not happen again. Let us make sure.

I bet if I asked, there would be people that stood up in this room when I asked the question how many of you have mentored a young person who had a health problem along the way that was not properly treated because people didn't have the funds to provide the health care, mental, emotional or physical, that would have prevented the problem in the first place. Let us make sure that all of the children in America, not just those we mentor, have health care necessary to grow in a strong and productive way.

We say to this nation -- we say in this nation to a 70-year-old person, you can have an operation that extends your life expectancy by three years, but we say to the children of the poor and the working poor, you don't have insurance, you don't have enough money, there's not preventive medical care available in too many instances.

Let's turn it around and spend our dollars up front. Let's look at the research. Lead, other environmental hazards in our housing across this land, are showing a connection with behavioral problems. Let's get lead out of the homes of children in America so that they can thrive in a healthy way and see a return on our investments down the road every step of the way.

Let us make sure that we provide our young people, not just when they come to the attention of the mentor, but daily, year-in and year-out, the supervision they need to grow in a strong way. When the crack epidemic hit Miami in 1985, the doctors took me to the public hospital to try to figure out what to do about crack-involved infants and their mothers. The doctors taught me that the first year of life is the most important, 50 percent of all learned human response acquired in that first year.

The concept of reward/punishment and conscience develop in the first three years. It happens because a parent is there

saying "no," "yes," "I love you," reading stories, creating a tone. It's not just the three-year-old, though. It's the six-year-old and the ten-year-old and the fifteen-year-old that needs that support.

Let us focus on workplaces that are family-friendly and give quality time with their children. When I went to school, we didn't have computers. I'll tell you there is an eraser in the new sculpture garden in Washington. You should all go take a look at it. Anybody under 30 isn't going to know what that typewriter eraser is.

You used to have to take the typewriter eraser and erase the original and four carbons. The world is a lot more complicated now, and schools are as important as ever. Let us focus on the schools of America and pay as much attention to our teachers as we pay to football players.

They never taught us how to resolve conflicts when they taught me how to use the eraser, but friends and family and those around us taught us sometimes by natural instincts. A lot of children don't know how to do that now, a lot of adults. But I have watched teachers and police officers and other concerned individuals teach youngsters how to resolve those conflicts without knives and guns and fists, how to be better problem-solvers, how to work together and communicate together and to listen together.

Let us make sure that every teacher coming out of teaching departments across colleges in this country come out with the skills necessary to teach our children how to resolve conflicts peacefully and that every police officer who goes to basic law enforcement training in this nation develops the same skills. It will pay benefits every step of the way.

People 10 and 15 years ago said drug treatment didn't work, but there's not a person in this room today that doesn't have someone, a loved one, a neighbor or a friend, a fellow employee, who is not the beneficiary of drug treatment. Let's make sure it's available and that you don't have to get arrested in order to get treatment, that you can get it.

Let's get that child at 12 who has obviously exhibited to family, to teachers, to neighbors mental and emotional problems. Let's stop saying mental health treatment just works some of the time. It works an awful lot of the time, and we've got to make sure that it is available to our young people so that they can have a chance to unlock some of the doors that terrorize them and walk out into a fresh, new future.

Let us make sure we give our young people the building blocks to grow and to be all that they can. You've seen it. There's nothing so tough and ornery as a youngster. They want so to be somebody. They want so to help other people. They want to make a difference. Let us give them that opportunity.

But it won't be programs that make the difference. It will be ultimately people who make the difference, people like you who care, people like you who are willing to suffer the disappointment of somebody you've mentored getting into trouble, but then getting out and getting on his or her way. It will be because of people like you who understand how important it is to let somebody know that there is somebody that cares about them when they've come home, having been bullied in school during the day or suffered a disappointment in a test that they thought that they were going to do far better on or after they've walked home in the afternoon to the music of gunshots.

It is amazing what people can do when they know other people care. For you who care so deeply, I salute you and say thank you from the bottom of my heart.

STATE OF ILLINOIS

SS:

COUNTY OF COOK

I, Lisa H. Breiter, CSR, RPR, CRR, a Notary Public within and for the County of DuPage, State of Illinois, and a Certified Shorthand Reporters of said state, do hereby

certify that I reported in shorthand the proceedings had at the taking of said meeting and that the foregoing is a true, complete and correct transcript of my shorthand notes so taken as aforesaid, and contains all of the proceedings given at said meeting.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and affixed my notarial seal this 23rd day of June, 1999.

LISA H. BREITER, CSR, RPR, CRR