



NORTHWESTERN LAW SCHOOL GRADUATION CEREMONY

STATEMENT OF ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

May 14, 2000

The Chicago Marriott Hotel

Grand Ballroom

540 North Michigan Avenue

Chicago, Illinois

2:34 p.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO: Thank you, Dean, and thank you all.

This is a great and wonderful law school, and I feel it all the more after having had a chance to speak and talk with some of your colleagues. Beth Hogan looked up at me, and she had stars in her eyes as she talked about the law, and there was an idealism in them all that's positively contagious.

It was 37 years ago that I stood in your place. I never dreamed that the law would give me the opportunity it has to try to make the world safer, healthier, a better, freer place to live for all people, but it has, and it has been the most wonderful opportunity that anybody could have. I ask of you, do not lose the idealism that I have seen in this group today. Carry it forward. Wear it as a banner and

enjoy the law and all its challenges as much as I have.

But I would like to challenge us all, the profession, Northwestern Law School, Northwestern University, alumni, and those who graduate today, for we have a golden opportunity to enhance the rule of law, to build better communities and to ensure a safer, freer nation if we use the law and the work that's done here at Northwestern in the right way.

The Center for Wrongful Conviction, The Children and Family Justice Center, The Center for International Human Rights are all examples of great efforts that you have undertaken.

And your strategic plan caught my eye: Promote the faculty to scholarship, not only informs and challenges students, academia and the profession, but also contributes to resolving the leading issues of the day. I like that and would like to challenge you to consider two leading issues of the day at which faculty, graduates and all of us can engage in a more effective manner than we have.

Crime is down now eight years in a row in this country, but it is still far too high and there is still too much violence. Children in the United States are nearly 12 times more likely to die from a gunshot wound than children in the 25 other wealthiest industrialized nations in the world. Violence does not have to be.

And from 1992 to 1996, this city had 3,063 gun homicides, Toronto, of equal size, had 100. Violence does not have to be in this nation if we approach it in the right direction. But what we've tended to do is send the prosecutor out to prosecute and get a conviction and think they've won the battle when they send the person off to jail. And send the public defender out to protect and defend, and he or she thinks that they have done so when they get their clients off on a motion to dismiss or motion to suppress, forgetting the fact that the person is in the grips of a drug addiction. That's the worst prison than any one we would send him to.

The street worker who engages in prevention doesn't work with the school teacher. The corrections officer is off by himself. The policeman is trying his best under difficult circumstances. We have not been educated to deal with the whole picture as it relates to crime in this nation and our community, and there is no real training in the universities of our country that teaches us how to look at the picture as a whole and connect the pieces.

And Civil Rights, we must do everything we can to guard against discrimination, to address the issue of racial profiling, and to consider the lack of diversity in this nation, but we choose to do it so often by litigation. There is no one that prepares us for giving every American the tool, from the time they are born, to grow in a strong and positive way and participate in the opportunity of America.

I urge this great university, this law school, and most of all, those who are graduating today, to take the lead in addressing the leading issues of the day by looking beyond narrow specialties and the law; to look at the whole problem of crime and unequal treatment in this country; to teach us to work together between disciplines in a unified manner with the academia, with other professions, with the people of this country; to address the problems and to teach leaders to be managers and volunteers to serve communities and knowing how to organize so that we look at the problem as a whole. That would include criminal justice, public health -- you need a public health school, President, to go with your wonderful efforts in the criminal justice -- education, science, psychology, social works, statistics, management -- lawyers don't know how to manage -- medicine, mental health.

Northwestern could reach out to others and could work with community colleges across the country to help America address these issues.

And then I suggest, Larry, if you go back to the "Washington Post" or wherever you go, and it's just going to be that way, you can, with the spirit that you exhibited here, and your colleagues, with the spirit that I have

seen, can make a difference in your communities if you're going to be the best transaction lawyer who never looks at criminal justice, but you can help a community define itself in a way that much more effectively addresses the issue of crime in America.

Define the community, identify resources, and consider the whole picture. Ensure public confidence in the traditional institutions. Lawyers are not very good at explaining themselves or the law or the system. Explain what you do so people will have confidence in why you are doing it. Nothing is more frustrating than a prosecutor suggesting that we can't prosecute a case for a variety of reasons, and then not being able to explain why they can't prosecute the case. The public doesn't understand.

Communicate in small, old words that create the moral force of the law. That is really the power behind it. Law is issued from the will of mankind. It's issued from the people. They're framed by mutual confidence, and they're sanctioned from the light of reasoning. They have to come from the whole, not just from some legislature or some judge handing down the law.

Surprisingly enough, cameras in the courtroom create an understanding if done right. It is so important that we are accountable as we explain the law.

In policing, we can do so much more if we look at it in an interdisciplinary way, and if we look at it from the point of view of what universities and the professions can do together. Police officers can learn to communicate more effectively by tone of voice, by body language.

To talk to young people who have been in trouble, they say one thing they most need is somebody to talk to, somebody who understands how hard it is to grow up in America today, somebody that knows how to treat them with respect, without putting them down, somebody who knows when to give them a pat on the back and when to give them a firm no.

How we do this can be enhanced by psychologists working

with police officers as they train, by young people and police officers coming together to learn how to talk to each other. This university and others could be great forces in taking policing to a new level that we have not known in its most effective manner.

The level of problem solving, of looking at problems in communities that cause crime, that's identifying people who are in trouble, the communities that are in trouble and designing programs within that neighborhood or on that block that make a difference.

Prosecutors. This law school has taken the lead, and this university has taken the lead through the center for making sure that innocent people don't get prosecuted. But are prosecutors taught around this country regularly how to avoid the charging of an innocent person? Are they taught about the problems associated with eyewitness testimony? Are they taught about what has happened in previous cases where people have been proven innocent, what caused the guilty conviction to take place? Are they taught the tools of science?

Let us bring the scientists and the prosecutors together, not when they develop the first case in which they're going to use DNA, but regularly throughout their education so that we make sure that innocent people are not prosecuted.

And let us always make sure that we prosecute the guilty according to principles of due process and fair play.

Then let us build partnerships. The feds used to come down when I was a local prosecutor and say, We want this, this and this. And we know better than you, and we'll give you this grant if you do that. And we used to look at them and say, What do you know about Miami? What do you know about its needs and resources and its problems? Why don't you listen to us and form a two-way street in which we can solve the problem together?

Design a comprehensive effort. There's a tendency in this world to go from extreme to extreme without ever stopping

with a proper balance. First, it's rehabilitation, then it's put them all in prison and throw the key away, and nobody thinks that there might be a balance in between where prevention, punishment, after care, intervention, treatment are all essential parts of the equation.

Then it is important to get the facts. We tend to pursue the criminal justice problem and the crime problem with just a lead here and a lead there. A detective gets a lead, turns it over to the prosecutor, they work together building the case, and they take out the tenth most important drug organization in the community, while number one through nine are flourishing.

Let us use our automation that we have today. Let us use the analytical skills that we have today to analyze the crime in a community. Is it a drug organization? Is it domestic violence? Is it child abuse? Is it a youth gang? What is the problem? Where is it occurring, and what census track? How is it happening? What is this armed career criminal doing? Do we need to renew our efforts against him?

Let us use our smarts to identify what the problem really is, then let us understand the demographics in the community for the next ten years. Are we going to see an increase in the number of young people? That's a dangerous sign if we already are confronted by youth violence. That means that we've got to put more emphasis on prevention programs for those younger than 12 and work together with everyone concerned to focus on the 13-year-olds.

Are we seeing an increase in elder abuse? Are the number of elderly increasing? How do we react? How do we design a community that focuses on the whole?

And then we've got to take what resources we have and focus them in the wisest manner possible. And you, as lawyers from this law school, have an opportunity to make a difference.

Let us start with zero to three. And you say, Why zero to three? If 50% of all learned human response is learned in

the first year of life, if the concept of reward and punishment is developed in the first three years, what good are all the prisons going to be 20 years from now if that child does not understand punishment? What good are all the great educational institutions going to be? And what good is affirmative action going to be if that child never learns in that first year the learned responses that are so critical?

We have got to make sure as we address these ages that parents are old enough, wise enough and financially able enough to properly care for a child. People talk glibly about teaching parenting skills. You don't teach parenting skills in one course, but universities across this country could better inform young parents and better inform us as to how we get young parents to be better parents.

But one of the keys that no university system is going to solve, because it hasn't solved the problem for itself, but what we are going to have to solve, and it is going to be your great challenge, is how we create time in our workplace and give both parents the opportunity for professional advancement, while at the same time providing quality time with their children.

I remember my afternoons after school and in the summertime, my mother taught us to play baseball, to bake cakes, to appreciate Beethoven's Symphony. She spanked us and loved us with all of her heart and taught us to play fair, and there's no childcare in the world that will ever be a substitute for her in our life.

As you go out, either with elderly parents who need love and care, or with children that come into this world, make sure that you tell those employers, what have you got to say about family life and opportunity to be with children? Not just in those first three years, but for the soccer game and the school recital and all the times that come thereafter?

If we can send a person to the moon, this nation ought to be able to organize itself so that parents can spend

quality time with their children and still hold the position as Attorney General.

Let this great medical school work with this great law school, with others, to see how we design a program that makes sure that every child in America has proper prenatal care and proper healthcare. It is wrong for a nation of this wealth to not have that exist.

The child who watches his father beat his mother even at the earliest of life comes to accept violence as a way of life. This nation has begun to focus on domestic violence, but doctors, lawyers, must start much earlier in the criminal justice system, and we must look at the whole picture and organize ourselves better by getting doctors to figure out what they do when they first see a patient to warn them about the problems associated with domestic violence, and people know that this is unacceptable and that they do not have to accept it and that there are alternatives through shelters and otherwise.

But this nation has got to come to grips with the problem, and as we have seen crime go down eight years in a row, we've got to see domestic violence go down in this nation.

And in public schools, they can do so much, but something is wrong with the nation that pays its football players in the six digit figures and pays its school teachers what we pay them.

And in safety, we can do so much in terms of truancy prevention and other efforts if educators understand the criminal justice system and vice versa and exchange information in appropriate ways.

Let us take our enforcement apparatus and figure out what the most important priorities are. Design with federal, state and local authorities efforts at surgically getting at the crime problems that are most important in the community, and let us be prepared, as we have never been before, to deal with the issues of cyber crime. Again, the law school, the university systems, can do so much, both in

terms of preventing cyber crime and working together with us to help solve these terrible situations.

We can do the same in Civil Rights. We can give to young people opportunities that they didn't have. Why do we wait until we consider affirmative action in law school and universities? Why don't we start considering affirmative action when children come into the world and make sure that they are prepared from the beginning?

If we look at the whole picture, we can make a more effective difference in both these leading issues of the day.

But, finally, for all that we do, we must do more.

It has been a privilege for me to meet with my colleagues from the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe, to see the stars in their eyes and the joy in their voice as they talk about the wonderful initiative that they have undertaken to bring democracy to their country. And then I see the frustration, and I see them stumble and fail on too many occasions.

I see established democracies struggling to come out of a tyranny that developed. Do not take your democracy and your freedoms for granted. Cherish them and give them your best. That means supporting the rule of law. That means speaking out, speaking out against hatred in this nation, hatred that undermines the very fabric of our society. Haters are cowards, and when confronted, they will back down.

The rule of law and majority rule will not work unless we establish stronger foundations of mutual understanding and tolerance, and that requires that we speak out positively, candidly and constructively, not without vindictiveness and spite, but with purpose, with collegiality, with thoughtfulness. Unless we do, we will see segments of society alienated, outraged, and violent.

Let us work together to listen to each other with a listening ear, to talk with respect, to understand and try

to put ourselves in the shoes of others, and go forth to lead this land we love, and to build stronger communities and to give the children that come today the opportunities for tomorrow.

You are a wonderful group of lawyers. When people ask me about the legal profession, I have only but to look at the new lawyers that I have met in this year and feel very confident that the profession is in great and able hands. Go and have a good time with the law.

(Whereupon, at 2:56 p.m. the statement was

concluded.)