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FULFILLING THE PROMISE OF AMERICA

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PRESENTATION BY:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO: Thank you. Thank you so much for that warm welcome. And thank you for being an example for the world about what can be done when people care, when people appreciate the wonder and the magnificence of the human spirit and know that, if we give just a little, we can do so much. Senator Walker, you have led the way and I salute you.

If somebody had told me when I was a little girl that I would be the Attorney General of the United States, charged with using the law to try to make America safer, healthier, more peaceful, I would have stood back and said, "You're crazy."

But it has been the most wonderful opportunity that any lawyer could have to try to serve the American people, both

in the public service and in citizen service.

Some people say, "Why do you do it? You get figuratively cussed at and fussed at and beaten around the ears. Is it worth it?"

And all I have to say is, "It is worth it? More than I can tell you."

To be stopped by a man on an escalator in an office building in Miami and have him say, "Thank you."

"What for, sir?"

"For arresting me."

"Well, I didn't arrest you."

"Yes, but your prosecutors got me into drug treatment after I had lost my family, lost my job, and I had hit rock bottom. You got me into treatment. And I've got my family back, my job back, and it has made all the difference."

There were people serving who cared. Service never ends. I will never forget the eighty-four year old man who stood up in a crowd and said, "Do you know what I do three mornings a week, for three hours each morning?"

I said, "No, sir."

"Do you know how old I am?"

I said, "No, sir."

He said, "I'm eighty-four years old and I volunteer as a teacher's aide."

And the teacher stood up with him and she said, "I'm the one he volunteers for, and he gives the children new vistas that they never dreamed they would have. And children with learning disabilities find that he has opened doors that

they never thought that they could go through."

And it is never too young. The eight year old who helps the teacher after school can make such a difference. Whether you be volunteers or people in public service, the church, the pro bono lawyers, service is the glue that can bring us together.

How can we best serve all our people? How can we serve most effectively? May I make a suggestion as a first start? That we do our duty to the people we love and those who love us first?

I remember my afternoons and summers, after school. My mother worked in the home. She taught us to play baseball, to bake cakes, to appreciate Beethoven symphonies. She taught us how to play fair. She punished us. And she loved us with all her heart and soul. And there is no child care in the world that will ever be the substitute for what that lady was in our life.

Let us work with everyone to develop workplaces where both parents can spend quality time with their children in formative, constructive ways.

Let us learn to devise service means that can enable us to care for and love and cherish our elderly parent in the home whenever possible, but that we do our duty to that parent.

Let us make sure that that developmentally disabled sibling is never forgotten and always cherished.

The second point I would make is to remember what democracy is all about. As attorney general, I have ministers of justice and prime ministers come to the conference room.

These are people from emerging democracies in eastern Europe or around the world. They come with stars in their eyes and enthusiasm for what they are doing. Sometimes they come back, beaten down, or lost, and you realize more than ever before how fragile democracy is.

Ladies and gentlemen, as part of service, we cannot take our democracy for granted. We must cherish it and work for it.

And service means voting and getting involved and saying, if I don't like it, let me go do something about it, but let me not sit on the sidelines and quibble about it.

Cherishing our democracy means protecting it. When people would violate our freedoms, let us speak up. And let us make sure that we use our freedoms.

Never let us be intimidated by others into silence and indifference. Let us speak out about what we believe in.

Let us speak out against hatred and about bigotry and discrimination. Haters are usually cowards and, when they are confronted, they back down. But if left alone, they flourish.

And I will never forget for as long as I live a visit in Germany when I was thirteen, asking people how Hitler came to power. "We just stood by."

Let us not stand by with our democracy. Let us bring people together.

Now, some people say to me, "Well, I'm not very forceful."

Just speak quietly, and you can make them back down. Or stand tall, and you can make them back down. But one way or the other, let us speak out. Let us bring people together.

We have learned so much about what can be done to develop understanding, to appreciate differences. We have learned so much about what can be done to resolve conflict without knives and guns and fists.

Let us as lawyers, as police officers, as citizens who care, learn how to solve problems, not just put bandaids over them. If we can work together to bring people together

in understanding, to resolve conflicts, to solve problems, we can be far more effective in service.

And then let us realize the great arena of service, the communities of this nation, and the world, and let us go forth to reweave the fabric of community around children and families at risk.

Let us leave no one out. Every person should be cherished in this world.

And then let us look, as we serve, at the building blocks of service. If we put a block here and a block there, we do not get the whole, the comprehensive problem solved as well as if we put the blocks in an orderly way, building the structure of life.

Where do we begin with those building blocks? I suggest we look at zero to five. And what are the building blocks of strong and healthy children in America?

One of the most important lessons I ever learned was when I was trying to figure out as prosecutor in Miami what to do about crack involved infants and their mothers.

The doctors took me to the neonatal unit at the public hospital. And the child development experts and others taught me that the first three to four years of life are the most formative.

That is when the child knows the concept of reward and punishment and develops a conscience. That fifty percent of all learned human response is learned in the first year of life.

And I suddenly thought to myself: What good are all the prisons twenty years from now if someone doesn't know what punishment means and doesn't have a conscience? What good are the educational opportunities eighteen years from now if someone doesn't have the strong foundation in those first years?

As we make our service more effective, let us make sure that we do everything we can to make sure those building blocks are in place. And that means strong and healthy parents. That means a focus on domestic violence, so that children grow up in a peaceful world. The child who watches his father beat his mother comes to accept violence as a way of life. And we have to break that cycle.

That may mean volunteering in a shelter. It may be serving as a court aide. It may be as a victim/witness volunteer.

But look at those building blocks and say: How can I, in my community, organize my community and use my service to make sure that parents are strong and healthy? That child support is being paid? That there is peace in the home?

And let us make sure there are homes. We can do so much in terms of community building, in terms of building structures that are livable and fine.

One of the things I most remember is in an area with a large number of children at risk on a 4th of July, they had made a model of the block in their neighborhood. I looked out the window of that school and I saw abandoned cars and houses falling around themselves and crack houses, and mattresses in the parkway, and vacant lots that were unmowed.

And the children had built the community that they wanted: The houses were structured, painted. The lawn was mowed. Everything was clean. And around the block they could put their cards of what they hoped for.

They hoped that people would stop hollering at each other and shooting, that people would be nice to each other, that I would have a chance to read more books, that I would have a chance to learn computers.

Let us give our young people the building blocks of life and do it right. Let us make sure that our children are healthy. It's just plain foolish not to invest in the health of our children. For every dollar spent in prenatal

care, we can save three dollars down the road for problems associated with the lack thereof.

Let us make the investment up front, by encouraging a system where so many of the wonderful doctors who want to volunteer can volunteer in an effective way, where we solve the problems of transportation for that person who needs to get her child to a specialist, that we make the trains run on time and enhance your service in every way that we can.

But what if the child's parents are denied the opportunity to get a job, a better job, or to get into certain housing?

Let us make sure our lawyers are trained and encouraged in pro bono service and that pro bono service become a fact of life for every lawyer. Somehow or another we can effect that.

The key to service, though, is knowing how to do it. And I have found again and again that if we serve by training first, we can enhance and make more effective everything that we do.

What about schools? Let us support our teachers. Something is wrong with the nation that pays its football players in the six digit figures and pays its teachers the way we pay them.

Now I'm going to challenge you, because I will tell you for seven years I've been saying that. And amongst all the things that I say, that gets the biggest applause.

We've got to translate that applause into action. I'm not saying paying to move, but let's make sure that we support our teachers, help them, be their aides, do the paperwork, give them the opportunity to stand before that class and teach with inspiration and with care. Because there are so many who care so much.

Used to be, all the ladies became teachers. Now they've started to become lawyers and doctors in greater and greater numbers. But there is nothing quite so magical as

being a teacher.

I have heard from some of my teachers -- I recently got a letter out of the blue from my fourth grade teacher. And I have had the opportunity in these four days to remember what that man did for me and the worlds he opened for me.

Let us make sure America's teachers have the wherewithal, the support, the assistance, the service, to open the doors for the children of America.

The Carnegie foundation has noted that the children of America are more alone and unsupervised and at risk than at any time in the history of the world in all probability.

It used to be that the world operated around a village. And the miller and his wife were there and the children were there at the mill. But now people go off to work.

Let us make sure that we organize our communities so that no child is left unsupervised because there aren't people that care.

The police officer who gets off duty at 3:00 becomes a marvelous mentor for a youngster on the verge of getting into trouble.

The computer expert who volunteers his time in an after school program with a computer bank that his company has provided can make such a difference in the lives of young people.

Let us make sure that in those wonderful hours that were so interesting and fine for me, for so many of you, that all children of an America have somebody they can go to, somebody that can protect them, somebody that can lead them, when they need it.

Let us make sure our children are safe. Help that police officer. If he's got some help, he can make a difference. But first of all, he's got to make sure you feel safe. Then he's got to watch out.

I watched a community police officer make a housing development safe again. And then the elderly lady came out from behind her door, which she had locked and barred, went down to the community center and gave everybody the what for and told them how to do things.

She got involved. She almost literally cussed out the police officer. He followed suit and told her what he could and couldn't do. They worked together. They became a team. They are so extraordinary.

We can do so much if we bring the private sector, police, the teachers, the courts, physicians together and look at violence in America as a criminal justice and public health problem.

Community after community has significantly reduced crime in America by everyone coming together, volunteers, the churches, ministers, people in business, to say, what is the problem? It's this drug gang. Let's take it out, but let's provide alternatives for our young people.

Let us give up on no one. There will be millions of people coming out of prison in the next five years in America, from federal, state and local prisons.

They can come back to the apartment over the open air drug market where they got into trouble in the first place. Or they can get into a program that can give them an opportunity to get off on the right foot. These young men and women want so to get off on the right foot, but they don't know how.

Senator Walker spoke of my experience in St. Louis this past January. They looked at me when the television cameras came in behind me like, hum, what's she here for?

About half I think were trying to stay out of prison. And the other half had had some jail or prison time. They cared a great deal about what they were doing, as they rehabbed this building.

When the television cameras left and I stayed, they looked at me a little bit more favorably. Then they said, "You want to do something?" I said, "That's why I came."

They said, "Well, you can nail these nails into these studs and put up this framing." They were big three penny nails. And I nailed the first one and they said, "Oh, you know how to do it." And I nailed a bunch of nails that afternoon, without bending one and having to pull out any, because I saw what they were doing.

We came together that afternoon. We had a good talk afterwards.

What those young men wanted, first of all, was their civil rights restored, so they could vote. We need to do that.

What those young men wanted was not to be put down and always suspected of being the person who committed the crime in the neighborhood because they had been to prison.

They wanted to be treated with respect. They wanted to be told when they'd done wrong, but they wanted to be given a pat on the back when they deserved it.

I have a suggestion. Let us not give up on anyone. Churches, private not-for-profit groups, an individual can develop with the courts of our communities re-entry programs, so that when a person is sentenced to prison, somebody becomes his mentor or his advocate in the community.

Keeps him in touch with his children. Sees what skills he might have an aptitude for that can provide him a job when he gets out. Works with others to give them a chance to come back for the community with a chance of success.

We are wasting a large part of America by not tapping these young people who want so to be involved. Let us make sure we open new doors for them.

Let us not give up on anyone. There are too many Americans in nursing homes or facilities that you wouldn't want your loved parent to be in. There are too many people subject to abuse and neglect that don't have to be there.

Let us work together as citizens serving people, as public servants, with people in the industry. Let us work together with business to develop a system that permits people to remain in their home and self-sufficient and thriving for as long as we possibly can. We're missing out on a great part of America.

In short, let us do what you do day in and day out. But let us bring our forces together so that we build the building blocks of life. Let us create a world where the human spirit is special, where the human spirit of everyone can shine through.

Now, some people say, Janet, it's all too difficult. I'm going to tell you a story that's been one of the most important I ever learned:

When I was eight, we had four children in our family. We lived in a little wooden house and we were outgrowing the house quickly. My father didn't have enough money to hire somebody to build a bigger house. And one afternoon my mother announced that she was going to build the house.

And we said, "What do you know about building a house?"

She said "I'm going to learn."

And she went to the brick mason and to the plumber and to the electrician and she asked them, "How do you 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, put in the wiring, the plumbing, and my father helped her with the heavy stuff when he came home from work at night.

She and I lived in that house until she died, just before I

came to Washington. And every time I came down the driveway, through the little dirt road through the woods and saw that house standing there, it was a symbol to me 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 then in August of 1992 Hurricane Andrew hit our area almost head on. About 3:00 in the morning the wind began to howl with an unearthly noise unlike anything I've ever heard. My mother got up. Sat down in her chair. Folded her hands and was totally unafraid, although she was old and frail and dying.

She was unafraid because she knew how she had built that house. She had not cut corners. She had put in the right materials. She'd built it the right way.

When we came out after the storm had passed, the world around us looked like a World War I battle field, but the house had only lost one shingle and some screens. Let us build the lives of America the right way, together.

Thanks to all of you who care so much. I salute you. I understand I'm going to have a wonderful opportunity now to hear questions from six students. And I'm looking forward to it.

But to all of you, thank you. You're wonderful and you are angels.

STUDENT NO. 1: Good afternoon. My name is Robin Angelo, and I'm from Springfield, Missouri. My question is:

There has been a rise in the number of violent crimes among young people and also a rise in media coverage. And I was wondering, what do you believe -- do you believe that the media has had any role in perpetuating this problem?

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO: First of all, is this echoing -- not echoing out?

We can do something about violent crime. And when I took

office, it had increased. Violent crime amongst young people, I said, was one of the great crime problems in America.

It's going down now. It's going down because young people care, because so much is being done in prevention programs, effective intervention programs, and it's one of the things that I'm proudest of.

But there is no doubt that the studies indicate the American Psychological Association and others indicate that television violence has contributed to violence in America.

I think we should let our feelings be known and not watch the stuff that causes the violence and not buy the stuff that advertises the violence.

This is an example of what I talked about first, which is don't stand by and let it happen. Speak out and say: Why are you advertising that program that puts the -- why are you paying to advertise on that program that puts on that violent stuff? Write to somebody and tell them.

STUDENT NO. 2: Hi. My name is Will Hauser. I'm from Bradenton, Florida.

Recently there have been two executions, one here in Florida and the other in Texas, and also a college professor and his students at Northwestern University in Chicago have made discoveries which would exonerate four men facing the death penalty. And these discoveries have also halted capital punishment in Illinois, among other states.

And in light of all this, my question to you, Attorney General Janet Reno, is simply: What needs to be done about the death penalty now and in the future?

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO: Well, first of all, as everyone knows, I'm personally opposed to the death penalty because I think the purpose of the law is to value human life and for the government to legally take it seems

inconsistent.

Secondly, all the punishment has the chance of being arbitrary. A father punishes two sons, he might punish one more severely than the other. But he can make up for it with time and love and care. But you can't make up for the death penalty if it's wrongfully imposed.

I think the only purpose of the death penalty is vengeance. And as I once said, if I had walked into my house and found that somebody had just killed my mother, I would do anything I could to hurt them as fiercely as I could.

I don't think vengeance is something that government should engage in. Thus, that's my short and long-term answer. But as a prosecutor, I have asked for the death penalty. As the attorney general, I have authorized the death penalty, when the law and the facts have justified it.

But one of the things that I would remember for as long as I live, then Governor Martinez here in Florida asked me to reinvestigate the case of a man who had been prosecuted, convicted and sentenced to death for the poisoning death of his seven children some twenty-two years before. He had always maintained his innocence.

We re-investigated the case and concluded that he -- the evidence had been insufficient to charge him originally. It was clearly insufficient now. With the death and incapacity of witnesses, we could not tell exactly what happened. But we felt strongly that he should go free.

I will remember for as long as I live turning to look over my shoulder as that man walked out of the courthouse a free man for the first time in twenty-one years.

And the criminal justice system has a duty to make sure that we investigate all crimes, both those subject to the death penalty and otherwise, as carefully as possible. Because the thought of the wrong person being held guilty, held culpable, is just too much of a horrible thing.

I think it is important for us all to review the cases that involve the death penalty to make sure we have the right person, that the aggravating circumstances sufficiently outweigh the mitigating circumstances to justify asking for the death penalty and that it be imposed in an even-handed way.

But that presents another problem: You see situations along the line where institutions have failed a child, where a family and school and neighborhood have left the child alone, at risk and unsupervised and so they get into trouble.

And the Court says, well, we might put them in home detention, but there is nobody at home, as opposed to another child, not a minority, who has an opportunity to go home to parents who care.

We have got to go back to those first years of zero to three and make sure all the children of America can grow up strong and peacefully and healthy.

STUDENT NO. 3: Hi. My name is Sarah Campbell. I'm from Alexandria, Virginia.

Being from around the Washington area, I've heard about the shootings at the Washington Zoo between rival gangs that actually shot -- they shot innocent people in the cross-fire.

My question is: With the NRA and other gun owners, who are against safer gun control laws, how do we keep this incident and other incidents of shootings across America from happening again?

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO: First of all, with respect to guns, it is important that you not stand by, that you speak out, that you speak out so that all of government can hear you, and so that they know that you're not only speaking out, but you're going to vote too, and you're going to vote for people who feel like you do.

But guns by themselves, the elimination of guns by themselves will not do the job. We've got to make sure that we put those building blocks in place that give our children an opportunity to grow, so they don't have to get involved in gangs.

Because there is something positive in the afternoons and in the evenings, there is somebody who they can talk to, an adult who knows when to give them a pat on the back and when to tell them they've done wrong. So they have constructive opportunities after school and in the evening.

We can make such a difference if we do the building blocks the right way.

STUDENT NO. 4: Hi. I'm Marcy Smith from Tennessee.

By supporting the national new network for juvenile and adult representatives from different organizations in creating forums of discussions such as this, you made a priority of seeking out new advisory boards in the Juvenile Justice Department.

And I was just wondering if you would recommend using advisory boards for other departments, such as the department of education, the department of health, and policy-making decisions?

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO: I recommend that everybody in America listen to young people. They are so wise. They have such a sense of fairness. They don't have it varnished over with one coat after another. They're real honest and they tell you like it is.

I think it's important for everyone in government, at the federal, state and local level to hear from young people. I love to go to schools and say, if you were the attorney general of the United States, what would you do to improve things in this country? And I get back some wonderful ideas.

So thank you for all you've done here.

STUDENT NO. 5: My name is Michael Thomas from Grand Rapids, Michigan, an America Promise Fellow. I'm working on a national program for young youth who promotes no weapons, drugs or alcohol.

And my question is: As a plan for this program, what key factors or what activities should I keep in consideration as for planning this program?

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO: What age group are you talking about?

STUDENT NO. 5: Eleven and fourteen year olds.

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO: I think mentors are extremely important, mentors who have been trained in how to work with young people, how to talk to them.

One of the things that I think is important is to talk to young people as if they've got some smarts and understanding, because they've got a lot more than some people think they do. But mentors who know how to talk to them, how to encourage, how to say no are very important.

I think opportunities to serve are vitally important. A young person who can serve and who can see that they've touched a life and made a difference is very important.

Tutoring can be important for somebody who's not had the educational opportunities up front.

You've got to have the mentor who knows how to talk to, when the young person comes back and says, "Look, I've got all these problems at home. What do I do?" That person has got to know where to go to help this young person solve their problems. Because the worst thing is to say, look, I've got these problems, and have nobody with solutions.

STUDENT NO. 6: Attorney General, thank you for your words today. They are quite awesome.

My name is Ben Smiler. I'm from St. Louis.

Schools across the country are suspending students in record high numbers. Zero tolerance policies are becoming more widespread leading to higher rates. The school shootings in Oregon were carried out by a student serving the first day of his year-long expulsion under the Gun Free Schools Act. Suspended students are upset in not getting an education and without instruction.

Outside of schools, the gun control legislation has a juvenile justice component that locks up more kids for longer periods of time.

Can we do better for our young people? Why are they locking up kids without trying rehabilitation and instruction? And how is it just and where will it lead?

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO: First of all, with respect to suspension, I think what we're faced with are teachers who are absolutely -- they are asked to do paperwork. They are asked to teach. They are asked to discipline. They are asked to counsel. They are asked to pick up the pieces. And they are asked to be police officers.

If we can free our teachers' time to teach, and if we can have people who know how to relate to that youngster in the school, so that we can try to keep him in the school or her in school, and so that we have programs in the immediate neighborhood that we can refer the child to for counseling, if we have people who can make a home visit to find out why the child is at risk and what the problem in the family is, we can make a tremendous difference in terms of keeping that child or young person in school.

With respect to charging children as adults or for longer periods of time, I think that if a child commits a crime that indicates absolute indifference to human life, or real mean intent, they should face a certain punishment. But it should be a punishment that fits the crime that is perceived as fair.

Because children, young people, have a great sense of

fairness. And if they know they've done wrong, they'll accept the fairness, if it's commensurate with other people's sentences.

But they have got to know that they are going to face some consequence, because there's no excuse for putting a gun up besides somebody's head and threatening them.

In short, what I think what we've got to do is start early, because many of the children that we're sending off to prison never learned what conscience and reward and punishment meant in those first three years.

We've got to start early, build carefully, and then provide programs for youngsters who are at risk, giving them a real opportunity. And by real opportunity, I mean not a slap, dab, here you go to this program for six weeks.

This kid is twelve years old. He's been neglected for twelve years. And it's going to take a lot more than a six weeks program to change his life.

We've got to figure out for some kids, who literally have no home to go back to, what we're going to do with them when you have a seventeen year old come out, absolutely firmly resolved not to get into trouble again, to graduate from high school, he shows some aptitude in a particular area, he wants to go to college, we've got to make sure that there is some alternative housing opportunities for that young person, with proper supervision, that can get them off on the right foot.

There are so many things that can be done. But more can be done when people serve. And I thank you for your service.

Thank you all.

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