

## Sixth Annual Sandra Day O'Connor Medal of Honor <sup>†</sup>

Presented by the *Seton Hall Law Review*,  
the Seton Hall Legislative Bureau, and  
the Seton Hall Women's Law Forum

November 16, 1998

### Remarks of Honoree Christine Todd Whitman Governor of New Jersey

I want to express my gratitude to the Seton Hall students from the *Law Review*, the Legislative Bureau, and the Women's Law Forum who selected me as this year's recipient of the Sandra Day O'Connor Medal of Honor. Thank you.

In looking over the list of women who have received this award in the past, it is clear that, while they come from a variety of backgrounds, they share something in common — the courage of their convictions and a recognition that leadership requires bold ideas and the commitment to carry them out. Whether you agree with all their individual positions or not, they all possess a certainty of purpose that you have recognized and respected. The previous recipients demonstrated a strength of character and a courage of their convictions that makes me honored to join them in accepting this award.

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<sup>†</sup> In recognition of the historic achievement of women in the legal profession, the *Seton Hall Law Review*, the Seton Hall Legislative Bureau, and the Seton Hall Women's Law Forum choose to honor women with the *Sandra Day O'Connor Medal of Honor*. Named after Sandra Day O'Connor, Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court, this award honors women who have distinguished themselves in the fields of law and public service. Prior recipients include First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, the Honorable Patricia McGowan Wald, the late Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, Marian Wright Edelman, and Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. The award symbolizes the common commitment of these women to promote rigorous, substantive dialogue on contemporary legal and public policy issues. The *Seton Hall Law Review*, Legislative Bureau, and Women's Law Forum are proud to celebrate the success of all women in the law and to acknowledge the importance of "equality under the law" for this generation and for those to come.

Sandra Day O'Connor made the decision to become an attorney long before it was thought that women would be suited for this adversarial profession. Upon her graduation near the top of her class from Stanford Law School, she found it difficult even to find employment as a lawyer. Today she is recognized not merely as the "first woman to sit on the Supreme Court," but as one of the great thinkers *ever* to sit on the Supreme Court.

Barbara Jordan, I believe, would take far greater satisfaction in knowing that the most important aspect of her legacy is that she advanced the cause of equality and justice before the law, not simply that she was the "first" in so many endeavors.

It is relatively easy to recognize those of us who did something first — the first female member of the nation's highest court, the first female governor, the first woman to head a corporation, fly into space, or break a world record. It is harder and far more meaningful to recognize someone not simply for when they did something, but, rather, for what, when, and *how* they did it.

To be among the "first" is a function of how inspiration and commitment meet with time. To be among the "best" is a function of how someone's inspiration and commitment make a difference. I do not want to go down in history simply as the "first female Governor of New Jersey." I hope to be remembered as a Governor who had the courage of her convictions, a desire to make a difference, and the commitment to get it done.

Making a difference can be sweeping or incremental. For instance, making a difference in public education in New Jersey required sweeping change. It required a recognition that the old way was not working — that pouring ever larger amounts of money into a system that measured its success by how much we spent on education, rather than how much we got from it, shortchanged our students and overcharged our taxpayers.

Frankly, we could have simply thrown more and more money at public education to get the court off our back and out of the debate. Other governors and other legislatures had tried that approach. But education is not about courts, it is about kids. It is about standards, accountability, and expectations. It is about giving students the education they need to have a chance at success in a world filled with challenge and opportunity. The book will never be closed on reforming education, nor should we ever want it to be. But now that we have made the sweeping changes our students deserve, we can make the incremental improvements our changing world demands.

Reforming education required that common sense replace convention, and that bold ideas replace timid ones. It required everyone who joined in this battle to hold true to the courage of their convictions, and that the interests of New Jersey's children be put ahead of those of New Jersey's special interests.

Incremental change can be seen in the Many Faces-One Family Initiative that I have adopted. In Many Faces-One Family, we are saying that no matter how different our backgrounds and our beliefs, there is much that unites us.

It would be quixotic to expect universal love of one another, but we can demand respect. We can ask one another to look beyond initial reactions or stereotypes of race, religion, or background and look for the common ground, while learning to appreciate the differences. That will not happen all at once, progress will be slow. In fact, I have often been scoffed at for attempting to bring people together in this way, but I am convinced it can be done and, as importantly, I am convinced it must be done.

Throughout your careers you will find your convictions put on trial every day of the week. There will always be detractors and there will always be distractions. The key to making a difference is knowing what you believe in, staying focused on achieving it, and being willing to take a stand for it.

I believe in tolerance and inclusion. I believe that we should seek common ground based on a commitment to common principles. I believe that we should find strength by building consensus and respecting differences. I am committed to recognizing that it is not a singularity of ideas that makes us great, but, rather, the diversity of our thinking that sets us apart.

The fact that we are gathered here tonight is an indication that the students who selected me for this award have the courage of their convictions and a respect for diversity of thought. For that, I am both honored and encouraged.

If I could leave you with one thought tonight, it would be to thank you. Thank you for having the courage of your convictions, and thank you for adding me to the list of honorees who have accepted this prestigious award.