

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Applauds Work of Florida in Law Related and Civic Education

“The Florida Bar should stand tall and proud of its work in the area of civics and law related education,” announced Justice Sandra Day O’Connor during her recent visit to Tallahassee. “This is just an outstanding program that is having a tremendous impact on our young people and our courts.” The retired associate justice of the United States Supreme Court attended a reception hosted by The Florida Bar following a whirlwind trip through Tallahassee. Holding the hand of Annette Boyd Pitts, Executive Director of the Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc., Justice O’Connor applauded the efforts of The Florida Bar, the Florida Bar Foundation, and the Supreme Court of Florida for its outstanding support of the model efforts of the Association. Chief Justice Peggy Quince introduced Justice O’Connor during the reception and Florida Bar President Jay White presented Justice O’Connor with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Justices, local appellate and trial court judges, and bar officials attended the reception along with school district officials, and local bar leadership, among others.

The Honorable Sandra Day O’Connor visited Tallahassee on Tuesday, April 7, 2009 to address a joint session of the Florida legislature and to emphasize the importance of civic and law related education. She met with Senate President Jeff Atwater who invited all of the female Senators to join him in his office and meet the first female justice of the US Supreme Court. President Atwater purchased copies of Justice O’Connor’s book, *The Majesty of the Law*, for her to autograph for the lady Senators.

Justice O’Connor also met with Speaker of the House of Representatives Larry Cretul as well as Rep Ron Reagan. In her presentation to the Joint Session, Justice O’Connor was introduced by Rep. Maria Lorts Sachs who walked up from the last row of the legislative seating. “It’s been a long walk,” Sachs reported, “but I have never been alone....Justice O’Connor has always led the way.” Justice O’Connor praised Florida for its legislation mandating civics in middle school. She encouraged them to keep setting the standard for valuing civic education.

In her speech, Justice O’Connor recounted a story of a visit that Justice R. Fred Lewis made to an elementary school in Tallahassee. During the visit, Justice Lewis and Annette Boyd Pitts, Executive Director of the Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. demonstrated a case study with fourth graders. The case study addressed the Tinker case and how speech at school cannot be disruptive. Although the Tinker case involved silent student protests of the Vietnam War by wearing black armbands, the Tallahassee students applied their newfound constitutional knowledge to silently protest food in their own cafeteria.

In addition to a reception in her honor hosted by The Florida Bar and her speech to the legislature, in other events Justice O’Connor addressed law school faculty and students, visited with local school officials and middle school students, and met briefly with members of the

Florida Supreme Court. Governor Charlie Crist escorted Justice O'Connor to his office for a meeting following her presentation to the legislature. Former Governor Rubin Askew also attended as did Rep. Sachs and Annette Boyd Pitts.

Students at Deerlake Middle School were eagerly awaiting Justice O'Connor's visit. They had constructed a bulletin board filled with "Want Ads" for selecting a good justice. Students read their want ads to Justice O'Connor and discussed the qualities of a good judge. Justice O'Connor was excited to visit with the students and share her OurCourts.org website. After the classroom visit, Justice O'Connor met with middle school civics teachers throughout the district. The "teachers were so excited to meet her...she is truly our hero," stated Cathy Schroepfer, civics resource teacher for the Leon county school district. Cathy shared her admiration for Justice O'Connor which began in elementary school. The teachers were able to ask questions and have photos made with Justice O'Connor.

Justice R. Fred Lewis met with Justice O'Connor to discuss their mutual interest in civic education including her new interactive courts web site and his Justice Teaching web-based initiative. The justices met briefly with Justice O'Connor at the Supreme Court and had photos taken in the courtroom.

Justice O'Connor is the first female Justice to serve on the United States Supreme Court. President Reagan nominated her as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, and she took her seat September 25, 1981. Justice O'Connor retired from the Supreme Court on January 31, 2006. Upon her arrival in Tallahassee, Justice O'Connor had dinner with the lady justices including Chief Justice Peggy Quince and Justice Barbara Pariente. First DCA Judges Marguerite Davis and Nikki Clark also attended.

Since her retirement in 2006, Justice O'Connor has been actively involved in advancing civic education and particularly promoting public education about the courts. She has spearheaded a new web-based civics initiative, www.OurCourts.org, designed to reinvigorate civics inside and outside of the classroom. Designed for students and teachers, the free resource provides civic education lessons, games, and opportunities for students to express their opinions and ideas.

Florida has revitalized civic education since the passage of legislation in 2006 mandating the teaching of civics in middle school. The Florida Bar played a critical role in increasing the visibility of the status of civic education in the public school system. Leon County Public Schools implemented a yearlong civics course in seventh grade this year. Developed with the assistance of The Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc., teachers in the county worked together to design the course which addresses a wide range of topics ranging from the Constitution and Bill of Rights to the American legal system, to civic and political participation. Students learn about their role in government using interactive strategies to engage students in our democracy. Volusia, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties have model courses as well at the middle school level. The course profiles can be found at www.flrea.org/programs/alliance.html.

The Supreme Court of Florida serves as a model for its commitment to civic and law related education. The Court hosts an annual institute for secondary teachers to explore the courts and

the Constitution. The institute implemented with assistance from the Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. is held at the Supreme Court of Florida and utilizes a real case to explore the administration of justice. Each justice participates as faculty in the institute that is scheduled in April.

Funding for the Supreme Court Teacher Institute program is provided to FLREA by the Florida Bar Foundation Administration of Justice Grants program. Middle and high school teachers participate in the program which provides a balance of clinical and academic experiences for teachers to learn about the structure and function of the courts through a hands-on experience.

Justices on the Florida Supreme Court also visit classrooms to interact directly with students about the courts and the Constitution. These and other initiatives are helping students and teachers experience government in a more direct and experiential fashion as opposed to just a textbook view.

Justice O'Connor had a full and exhausting itinerary during her visit. "We were so honored to have her in Tallahassee," said Annette Boyd Pitts, Executive Director of the Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. Pitts was able to spend the day escorting Justice O'Connor to and from each scheduled appearance. "It was an opportunity to honor her service to our country and to share her commitment to civic education with Floridians."

Justice O'Connor was born in El Paso, Texas, March 26, 1930. She married John Jay O'Connor III in 1952 and has three sons - Scott, Brian, and Jay. She received her B.A. and LL.B. from Stanford University. She served as Deputy County Attorney of San Mateo County, California from 1952-1953 and as a civilian attorney for Quartermaster Market Center, Frankfurt, Germany from 1954-1957. From 1958-1960, she practiced law in Maryvale, Arizona, and served as Assistant Attorney General of Arizona from 1965-1969. She was appointed to the Arizona State Senate in 1969 and was subsequently reelected to two two-year terms. In 1975 she was elected Judge of the Maricopa County Superior Court and served until 1979, when she was appointed to the Arizona Court of Appeals. President Reagan nominated her as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, and she took her seat September 25, 1981. Justice O'Connor retired from the Supreme Court on January 31, 2006.

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