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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF LAW
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
BY JANET RENO

- - - - -

MAY 12TH, 1995
2:00 O'CLOCK P.M.
THE OHIO THEATER

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ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you
very much for that warm welcome.

I am so honored to be here with this
graduating class as you commence a great
adventure, a great adventure in the law.

From this land where many of you
were born, from this great law school where
you have come to learn, from the friends and
people that have touched your lives, you will
draw strength and courage and wisdom for the
rest of your life.

Three years ago I came to Washington
to accept one of the greatest challenges that
any lawyer could undertake. But I was not
alone, for with me there were memories of

1 people. There were people with me in spirit
2 every step of the way.

3 My law school dean, my contracts
4 professor, my babysitter, my American history
5 teacher, my law school classmates, family and
6 friends, some deceased were there, encouraging
7 me, supporting me, and reminding me of where I
8 came from.

9 So as you leave this wonderful
10 institution today, stop and cherish the people
11 who have touched your lives, the faculty,
12 family, and friends. And then, for the rest
13 of your life, reach out and touch others and
14 help them along the way.

15 Stop and cherish the cultural
16 traditions of the many heritages that are
17 reflected and represented in this law school.

18 Stop and cherish honor, and remember
19 how important it is to have a friend whose
20 word you trust.

21 Stop and cherish principle, and
22 remember how important it is to have someone
23 who is willing to stand up and fight for what
24 they believe in.

25 Stop and laugh at yourself. And if

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1 you can't laugh at yourself, find a brother
2 who teases you, even if you're the attorney
3 general, and makes fun of you and makes sure
4 you don't take yourself too seriously.

5 Stop and cherish the law, for it has
6 been one of the most wonderful friends that I
7 have ever had in all this great adventure.

8 But most of all, stop and be
9 yourself. Do not become known for the law
10 firm that you join. Don't become known for
11 the money you make, for the house you live in.
12 But become known for yourself, for who you
13 are, and what you stand for, and what you do
14 for others.

15 And then with the spirit, the
16 courage, and the intellect that is so evident
17 here today, use the law to protect others, to
18 solve their problems, and to serve people in
19 this world.

20 Speak out against the hatred, the
21 bigotry and the violence in this land. Most
22 haters are cowards. When confronted, they
23 back down. When we remain silent, they
24 flourish.

25 In Nazi Germany people stood silent

1 as Hitler and his fascism took hold. We
2 cannot forget that example.

3 As you pursue this great adventure,
4 both as a lawyer and as a person, speak out
5 against those who discriminate, those who
6 hate, and those who preach violence.

7 Do not stand on the sidelines, but
8 instead defend and protect the rights and
9 freedoms that you have studied for three
10 years.

11 These rights and freedoms do not
12 find lasting strength on the paper that they
13 are written on. They find their force in the
14 hearts, and the minds, and spirit of lawyers
15 who are willing to fight for them, advocate
16 for them, and never give up their defense of
17 them.

18 Sometimes these efforts are not
19 expressed in constitutional arguments but in
20 complex, tedious factual study of the issues.

21 Recently I have come to know of a
22 case that first began in 1984 when a young
23 girl was murdered. A man was arrested and
24 charged with the murder. He was tried,
25 convicted and sentenced to death.

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1 Two years later his conviction was
2 overturned. After a second trial, he was
3 again convicted, and this time sentenced to
4 life in prison.

5 In 1989 a new lawyer took on what
6 seemed to be a hopeless case, but he wouldn't
7 give up because the man maintained his
8 innocence.

9 He realized at that point that
10 forensic science had made advancements. He
11 filed a motion to preserve the evidence which
12 might have otherwise been routinely destroyed.

13 The prosecutor's office, acting in
14 the best tradition of a public servant,
15 willingly cooperated. The office agreed to
16 DNA testing. Experts at the lab concluded
17 that the samples in question could not have
18 come from this person.

19 The FBI confirmed the result. The
20 lawyer's motion for a new trial was granted.
21 The state withdrew the charges. And because a
22 lawyer never gave up fighting for what was
23 right, a man was free.

24 I used to read of occasional cases
25 like this and I thought that they might be

1 isolated or unreal. But as a prosecutor in
2 Dade County, I was asked to reinvestigate the
3 case in another jurisdiction by the governor
4 of a man who had been prosecuted, convicted,
5 and sentenced to death for the poisoning of
6 his seven children in 1968.

7 He served 21 years in prison, for
8 the death penalty had been set aside. I
9 concluded that the evidence was insufficient
10 to charge him and that he should go free.

11 And for as long as I live, I will
12 never forget looking over my shoulder as I
13 left that courthouse and watching a man walk
14 free because of what I and lawyers in my
15 office had done. Never, ever give up fighting
16 for what you believe.

17 We are a government of the people,
18 by the people, and for the people. And the
19 people in this nation for 200 years have
20 created a government that has provided more
21 freedom and more opportunity than any
22 government in the history of the world.

23 But some Americans sit on the
24 sidelines and snipe and carp at this
25 government. They don't participate. If our

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1 form of government is to prevail, then the
2 very best people, the very best lawyers must
3 be a part of that government and contribute
4 positively.

5 I think public service is one of the
6 great callings I know. You get criticized,
7 you get fussed at, you get cussed at, you get
8 in the papers all the time the wrong way. But
9 there is no greater undertaking than to try to
10 make things better for other people.

11 Some don't pursue public service in
12 government, but you can contribute so much in
13 your community if you participate in the
14 process. You can make a difference. You can
15 change things.

16 A month ago, as the sun was setting
17 before it rose again on Easter Sunday, I was
18 in Dover, Delaware listening to President
19 Clinton honor Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and
20 32 other Americans who died in that plane
21 crash in Bosnia.

22 They were young and old, men and
23 women, government workers and leaders, but
24 they were all there because they believed that
25 they could help a ravaged country heal from a

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1 civil war.

2 "These 33 lives," said the
3 President, "show us the best of America. They
4 are a stern rebute to the cynicism that is all
5 too familiar these days."

6 He talked about how family after
7 family told him how their loved ones were
8 proud of their work, and believed in what they
9 were doing, and believed they could make a
10 difference.

11 As you pursue public service, as you
12 contribute in your communities, you can make a
13 difference.

14 Use the law to solve problems, to
15 avoid conflicts, and to improve circumstances.
16 Most of the great issues of the law are
17 resolved on a daily basis, not by lawyers in
18 the courtroom, not by the lawyers in argument,
19 but by lawyers who know how to negotiate and
20 to resolve issues for the mutual benefit of
21 all concerned.

22 Problems are resolved by lawyers who
23 properly structure a deal, incorporate a
24 business, and arrange leases so that problems
25 do not arise. Quiet, unassuming lawyers who

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1 work behind the scenes are the backbone of the
2 law. And your contribution in that area is so
3 critical.

4 But as wonderful as the law is, too
5 many Americans do not have access to the law.
6 We must make the law available to all
7 Americans.

8 Eighty percent of the poor and the
9 working poor in this country do not have
10 access to lawyers. For them the law is worth
11 little more than the paper it is written on.
12 We must devise new means to give people the
13 opportunity to believe in the law and to make
14 it real for all Americans.

15 As a first step, I suggest let's
16 work together to make the law simpler, better
17 understood, more user-friendly so that people
18 can use the law themselves without having to
19 resort to lawyers.

20 Winston Churchill cautioned us to
21 use small, old words. I think part of my
22 learning curve in Washington has been getting
23 used to Washington jargon and the way
24 Washington describes laws. I can understand
25 why people feel they have to go to lawyers to

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1 be represented in even matters like social
2 security.

3 Simplify the process. Make it as
4 easy as possible for people to respond. Avoid
5 slogans. Describe just what you mean in terms
6 that people can understand. If you solve a
7 problem, explain how that problem and others
8 similarly akin to it may be avoided for the
9 future. And make your office friendly to
10 those who come to seek your service.

11 Pro bono service is in the great
12 distinguished tradition of great lawyers. We
13 hear a lot about it, but those who perform it
14 get such great satisfaction from it.

15 As you go back to your communities,
16 determine how you best can provide pro bono
17 service. I have established a pro bono policy
18 in the Department of Justice urging as a goal
19 that all lawyers do 50 hours of community
20 service. The response has been
21 extraordinarily gratifying.

22 But as I spoke to faculty and
23 students just before we came into this hall, I
24 was so impressed to hear how many had been
25 involved in some form of legal services.

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1 Support legal services in this country and in
2 your community.

3 Consider how we might develop the
4 concept of community advocates so that there
5 might be people with skills not necessarily
6 akin to a lawyer who can also quite
7 confidently help fulfill the void.

8 Now, some of you may scoff and say,
9 "That's not my interest, I don't want to have
10 anything to do with legal services," but let
11 me put it in perspective.

12 Lawyers must accept the challenge.
13 All lawyers must accept the challenge to make
14 the law real for all Americans, for if we do
15 not, those who have no remedies in their quest
16 for justice will come to distrust the law so
17 much that they lash out against it and the
18 institutions on which it is based. If we care
19 about the law, if we want it to continue to
20 work, we have got to make it real.

21 Use the law to speak out for the
22 children of America, even the frailest, for
23 they are the people perhaps most
24 underrepresented of anybody in this nation.

25 Sometimes the case is complex. For

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1 example, Phillip was born in 1969 with Down
2 syndrome. His parents, feeling they had no
3 alternative, placed him in an institution a
4 few days after birth.

5 At first his parents visited him
6 frequently, but soon their visits were less
7 and less often. The director of the facility
8 where he lived actively recruited volunteers.

9 Mr. and Mrs. H began to volunteer.
10 They befriended Phillip, whose condition had
11 deteriorated due to lack of education, love,
12 and adequate attention. They helped him
13 attend school and learn basic life skills.

14 As time went on, people saw less and
15 less of his parents. Phillip saw his less and
16 less of his parents and spent more and more
17 time with his new family. He was openly
18 accepted as a member.

19 In 1977 the doctor informed
20 Phillip's parents that a congenital heart
21 defect was surgically correctable with little
22 risk, and recommended surgery in order to
23 avoid a progressively deteriorating condition
24 and the probability of death before the age of
25 30.

1 His real parents decided against the
2 surgery. They felt it would be merely life
3 prolonging rather than life saving, presenting
4 the possibility that they would be unable to
5 care for Phillip during his later years.

6 But Mr. and Mrs. H, the volunteers,
7 decided to try to become Phillip's legal
8 guardian so that he could live with them and
9 they could consent to the surgery.

10 An attorney, who had been a United
11 States Supreme Court clerk and was now a
12 partner at a prestigious firm in San
13 Francisco, took the case on a pro bono basis.
14 He argued the case. He organized efforts in
15 support of it across the country. He was
16 successful.

17 Phillip had the surgery and it was
18 successful. The H's adopted him, and today,
19 at 29, Phillip lives with that family, goes to
20 dances, pot lucks with his girlfriend, is
21 learning to use the computer, and he enjoys
22 life to the fullest.

23 That lawyer felt before he died that
24 his greatest single professional contribution
25 was what he did for Phillip.

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1 The tragedy in America is that there
2 are thousands and thousands of Phillips across
3 this country, neglected, in a run-down slum,
4 abused, at risk.

5 Reach out through pro bono efforts
6 to give them a strong and positive future.
7 Reach out through your community contributions
8 to build community coalitions that reweave the
9 fabric of society around these frail
10 Americans, these frail Americans who have done
11 no wrong. Each lawyer can make a difference.

12 But some may say, "Look, I'm just
13 not interested. I'm going to practice
14 corporate law. I am not interested in
15 children." Let me put it in perspective.

16 Unless all of us make an investment
17 in children and make the law real for children
18 in America, we will not have a workforce with
19 the skills necessary to fill the jobs to
20 maintain that corporation's workforce and to
21 maintain your client.

22 Unless we make an investment in
23 children today, we will not have enough jails
24 18 years from now to house those children who
25 have been neglected and turned to crime along

1 the way.

2 Unless we make an investment in our
3 children now, health care institutions will be
4 brought to their knees by lack of proper
5 preventative medicine. It's only common sense
6 that, for all of us, no matter what type of
7 law we practice, dictates that we must give
8 our children a future.

9 (Applause.)

10 We must save this land for our
11 children. Each of us has a favorite lake, a
12 favorite river, a favorite mountain. And for
13 some of us, it's just a patch of sky. From
14 this environment comes the air we breathe, the
15 water we drink. We cannot take that for
16 granted.

17 If you come to represent the land
18 developer, make sure that you don't transgress
19 that environment.

20 If you're the county attorney, make
21 sure that you make the laws that protect our
22 environment one of your great, great
23 priorities.

24 And if you're just a lawyer who has
25 a general practice, never, ever forget the

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1 land we love, the air we love.

2 But finally, as you leave this great
3 law school, as you pursue your great
4 adventure, remember the most precious
5 possession of all: Your family and the
6 children you have or will soon have.

7 I remember my afternoons and
8 evenings after school. My mother worked in
9 the home, my father worked downtown. My
10 mother had started to build a house. And when
11 she wasn't building the house, she taught us
12 to play baseball, to bake cakes, to appreciate
13 Beethoven's symphonies, and to love the poets
14 that she cherished.

15 She taught us to play fair. She
16 taught us the right way to do things. She
17 punished us and she loved us with all her
18 heart. There is no childcare in the world
19 that will ever be a substitute for what that
20 lady was in our life.

21 As I look out at young lawyers in
22 the Justice Department now, as I listen to
23 them try to balance family and profession, of
24 how they get breakfast on the table and the
25 children off to school, get to the court, try

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1 a case, enter new witnesses until 7:00 at
2 night, come home, put dinner on the table, get
3 the children bathed, and the homework done,
4 they work on the weekends to get ready for
5 trial on Monday morning, and they don't have
6 quality time with their children.

7 These children are going to be grown
8 up before you know it. Raising children is
9 the single most difficult thing I know to do.
10 It takes love, hard work, intelligence, and an
11 awful lot of luck. But it is one of the
12 singly most rewarding things that anybody can
13 do.

14 I know because, in the middle of
15 everything else, I inherited two children age
16 15 when their mother and father died. And it
17 is one of the most difficult jobs anybody can
18 do.

19 So do not get so absorbed in the
20 practice of law and the rest of the world
21 around you that you forget those who are
22 nearest and dearest to you.

23 Join law firms that can put family
24 first. Talk to them about what kind of leave
25 they provide, talk to them about next time.

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1 But make sure you put your family first as you
2 pursue this great adventure.

3 And then, as you begin it, go forth
4 to protect the rights and freedoms of our
5 people, to solve their problems and help them
6 build a nation of peace and understanding.

7 Thank you and good luck.

8 (Applause.)

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