

<title>10-11-96: Address at Jefferson Junior High School, Washington, DC.</title>

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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PEER MEDIATION INDUCTION

8

AND OATH OF OFFICE PROGRAM

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JANET RENO

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ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

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Jefferson Junior High School

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801 7th Street, S.W.

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Washington, D.C.

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October 11, 1996

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1 P R E S E N T A T I O N

2 I am very pleased to be at Jefferson
3 Junior High School because in Miami, when I was
4 State Attorney, I used to go to a different
5 school on the average of once a week.

6 I found students asked me good
7 questions, and they had good ideas and that
8 they made such a major contribution to their
9 community and to their school. I think young
10 people can make such an extraordinarily
11 important difference in making this world a
12 better place.

13 Once, as a prosecutor, I had a lady
14 demand to see me. She dragged her
15 thirteen-year-old daughter into my office and
16 said, "My daughter is not going to testify,"
17 and I said, "Well, why not? She saw this old
18 lady knocked down."

19 The little girl was on her way home
20 from school. This little old lady was walking
21 in front of her. This car screeched to a halt.
22 A man jumped out, knocked her down, and took

1 off with her purse.

2 The young lady went and called 911,
3 911 responded, and they picked up the man about
4 five blocks away, but the old lady could not
5 identify him.

6 The young girl turned to her mother,
7 and she said, "Mamma, I have to testify. That
8 is the American way of doing things. He has
9 got his day in court, but I can't let that old
10 lady's crime go unavenged."

11 And she testified. She was a
12 wonderful witness, and she made a difference,
13 and he was convicted. And that little old lady
14 was one of the happiest people you have ever
15 seen to see that justice was done.

16 Once I went into a high school to a
17 drug treatment program educating youngsters
18 about drugs, and I thought I might be going
19 just to talk to a few students. Instead, I was
20 ushered into the gymnasium.

21 The students had put on the drug
22 education and prevention program. They

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1 designed it, they chose their speakers, they
2 created their workshop, and it was one of the

3 best drug education programs that I had seen.

4 About three weeks later, I was asked
5 to go to another school because they had had a
6 representative at the first school, and the
7 program was repeated by students who cared, and
8 were making a difference.

9 About a week later, I was walking
10 down the street, and a young man pulled on my
11 shirt sleeve. And he said, "I was at that
12 program. I was getting into drugs, and I want
13 you to know it has made a difference for me,
14 and I am trying to get treatment, and I am
15 trying to get help, and I want to thank you."

16 And I said, "Don't thank me. Thank
17 your students. Thank your peers. Thank the
18 people who can make a difference."

19 I went to tutoring programs in my
20 community and saw youngsters in junior high
21 school tutoring kids in the elementary school,
22 and making a difference.

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1 I saw elementary students who
2 couldn't wait for their time with their tutor.
3 Each of us can make a difference.

4 And then, about ten years ago, I

5 began to see peer mediators at work, and I saw
6 the difference that they made in their schools,
7 and in their community.

8 Young people have such tremendous
9 energy. They want so much to contribute, and
10 you can contribute in so many different ways.
11 For those of you who have undertaken this
12 important work as mediators, thank you, it is
13 so very critical for us all.

14 As Attorney General of the United
15 States, I am responsible for the FBI, the DEA,
16 the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the Immigration
17 and Naturalization Service, the Marshal
18 Service, and most of the government lawyers.

19 By the very nature of what we do at
20 the Department of Justice, we have a lot of
21 conflicts. I have a big conference room where
22 I have my staff meetings or I meet with my

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1 lawyers, or FBI agents to figure out what we
2 are going to do about a particular case.

3 I will have five people on this side,
4 and five people on that side, and they will
5 have ten different views, and sometimes they

6 hold their views very, very strongly.

7 When I first start listening to them,
8 it is like we are never going to get them to
9 agree, but then, as you start listening and
10 using the tools that you all have learned as
11 mediators, you begin to make sure that they
12 communicate, that they talk to each other
13 instead of past each other.

14 And by the end of an hour, they are
15 agreeing. You haven't taken sides, but you
16 have made sure that they know how to talk to
17 each other.

18 The FBI, in another situation where
19 it was not personal disagreement on a matter of
20 law but an issue of how we apprehended the
21 group called the Freeman without exposing
22 people to danger and to violence, the FBI could

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1 have gone in with guns blazing, but it didn't.

2 It talked, and it talked, and it talked, and
3 those people came out peacefully, and the issue
4 was resolved.

5 We can do so much when we reach out
6 through conflict resolution programs, whether
7 it be as Attorney General or as a student at

8 Jefferson Junior High School, to make a
9 difference.

10 In the last few years I have seen it
11 at work in the community. I used to see some
12 police officers who came into a school, and
13 they would elbow and talk to people like they
14 didn't have much respect.

15 And then I saw community police
16 officers come in. I saw officers come into
17 schools and into a neighborhood talking to
18 people, communicating with people, working
19 together to resolve problems. If we talk, we
20 can resolve so many problems.

21 We are teaching lawyers in the
22 Department of Justice how to handle a lawsuit

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1 not by trying a case in a court but by sitting
2 down with the people and resolving the issue.
3 The same kind of techniques can work in
4 disputes among students here at Jefferson.

5 You are one of the many schools in
6 the District of Columbia and across the country
7 that have adopted peer mediation as a way to
8 help students learn how to solve disputes. A

9 peer is someone like you, someone about your
10 age, another student here at Jefferson.

11 Peer mediation is a chance for
12 students to work with other students to help
13 them resolve problems, arguments, disagreements
14 without having to get the teacher or the
15 administration involved.

16 I have been learning a lot more about
17 peer mediation as it has been conducted in the
18 public schools. I have watched teachers in
19 training programs, and I have visited schools
20 where youngsters are learning how to mediate.
21 I have even taken part in some of the training
22 myself.

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1 What do peer mediators do? First of
2 all, they listen very carefully. When I see
3 two people in dispute, it is often because they
4 haven't heard each other. They haven't heard
5 the whole story.

6 A good mediator asks questions so
7 that the whole story comes out. They help you
8 come up with solutions. They might not suggest
9 it, but they may lead you into the solution
10 just because you have heard the full story and

11 can work it out.

12 And they keep what they hear to
13 themselves. They don't go blabbing it around
14 to other people. Confidentiality is very
15 important to the process.

16 What don't mediators do? They don't
17 take sides. They let you and the person that
18 you are in conflict with talk it out. They
19 don't decide who is right and who is wrong. In
20 most conflicts, there is neither a right nor a
21 wrong. Everybody is a little bit to blame.
22 They don't solve the problem for you. They

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1 help you solve the problem.

2 They don't tell you what to do, they
3 just help you get to what you should do. They
4 don't spread what they hear.

5 Peer mediation is a way to try to
6 settle arguments before they turn into
7 something bigger, and maybe even into violence.

8 I think our young people are our most
9 precious possession. As Attorney General, I
10 have said that one of the great crime problems
11 we face in this country is youth violence. I

12 want to do whatever I can in the time I am in
13 this office to give the young people in this
14 nation a strong and safe and positive future,
15 and this is one way of doing it.

16 Let me give you some examples, and
17 remember, the mediators haven't told me any of
18 the names, they have just told me about these
19 cases. Two girls had been friends, and now
20 they were quarreling. And one complained to
21 the other that she was harassing her and
22 talking behind her back.

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1 There were rumors flying that the two
2 girls were going to fight. The two went to
3 talk to mediators and discovered, that by
4 talking it out with the mediator's help, there
5 was really no serious quarrel between them.

6 Others were simply stirring up the rumors.

7 The two girls agreed with each other
8 not to fight and not to pay any attention to
9 rumors and to tell their friends that they
10 wouldn't listen to rumors. Each of the girls
11 said that the mediation really helped. It got
12 things out in the open in a way that the two
13 couldn't have done it by themselves.

14 In another example, two young men had
15 a misunderstanding about whether one of them
16 was going to put in a good word for the other
17 with a certain young lady. Over a few weeks,
18 several other misunderstandings caused an
19 increase in the bad feeling between the two.

20 They knew they needed to talk about
21 it, but, when they met, just the two of them,
22 they started yelling and fussing and

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1 criticizing each other, and they came very
2 close to blows.

3 When the peer mediators got involved,
4 the two were able to talk more calmly and
5 straighten out the misunderstandings. They
6 agreed to talk to each other about any problems
7 before taking any other action, to ignore
8 rumors from others, and to tell others that the
9 issues between the two of them weren't anybody
10 else's business.

11 You will face them all your life,
12 conflicts. There will always be disputes, and
13 they are not all bad. Good things can come
14 from conflict if it is handled properly. What

15 we want to do is to keep it from becoming
16 violent, to keep friendships from being broken,
17 to keep people from being injured.

18 Sometimes you can settle arguments
19 yourself peacefully, but these mediators are
20 going to learn, as they have already, is that
21 the tools you learn in mediation can be learned
22 to use to solve disputes yourself so you don't

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1 have to go to mediators.

2 Having someone else there who isn't
3 part of the argument, someone who is neutral,
4 can really make the difference. One of my
5 favorite stories about how mediation works best
6 is this: Suppose for a moment that you and
7 your brother may be arguing over the last
8 orange in the ice box. You both want it, and
9 you both can't figure out how to share it, so
10 you end up splitting it in half because you
11 couldn't agree on who should have it.

12 But it turns out that you want to
13 make orange juice with this orange, and your
14 brother wants to use the peel for a cake that
15 he is baking. If you could have talked it out,
16 you each could have gotten the whole part of

17 the orange you needed.

18 Of course, many disputes can't be
19 resolved that easily, but that is an example of
20 what we are talking about.

21 One of the things that I would like
22 to do, with your permission, is I don't like

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1 adults that come and talk a lot. And I would
2 like you to be thinking of questions that you
3 have of me about what I do for mediation, and
4 let me save some time for you to ask me
5 questions and for the mediators to ask me
6 questions that might be helpful to them.

7 But I want to close with a story. It
8 is one of the most important lessons I learned,
9 and I learned it about your age. We lived in a
10 little wooden house.

11 There were four children in the
12 family. We were a year apart. I was the
13 oldest, and we were quickly outgrowing this
14 little wooden house.

15 One afternoon, my mother announced
16 that she was going to build a bigger house, and
17 we turned to her, and we said, what do you know

18 about building a house? And she said, "I am
19 going to learn."

20 And she went to the brick mason, she
21 went to the electrician, she went to the
22 plumber, and she asked them how to build a

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1 house. And she came home, and she dug the
2 foundation with her own hands with the pick and
3 shovel.

4 She put up the block, the cement
5 block. She put in the electricity and the
6 plumbing, and my father would help her with the
7 heavy beams when he came home from work at
8 night.

9 It took her several years to build
10 that house, but she and I lived in it until she
11 died just before I came to Washington. And
12 every time I had a really difficult problem to
13 deal with, I would come down through the woods
14 and see that house standing there.

15 And it was a symbol to me that you
16 can do anything you really want to if it is the
17 right thing to do and you put your mind to it.

18 And that house taught me a more
19 important lesson when Hurricane Andrew hit our

20 area in 1992. We got some of the highest winds
21 of Hurricane Andrew, a devastating storm.

22 About 3:00 in the morning, the winds

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1 began to howl, and I have never heard such an
2 unearthly noise in all of my life. You could
3 hear the trees crashing around the house.

4 My mother got up. She was old and
5 frail, but she was unafraid, and she just sat
6 down in her chair, and she folded her hands.
7 And she was unafraid because she knew how she
8 had built that house. She had put in the right
9 materials. She had not cut corners. She built
10 it the right way.

11 In the morning when we went out after
12 the storm had passed, the world looked like a
13 World War I battlefield. The trees were down
14 around the house, but the house was missing
15 only one shingle and some screens. And it is a
16 symbol to me of when you build something, build
17 it the right way.

18 You have an opportunity here at
19 Jefferson, this wonderful school, to build your
20 life the right way, to put in the good

21 materials, to learn the skills of how you talk
22 to each other, how you listen to each other,

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1 how you respect each other, how you solve
2 problems.

3 You have that opportunity to build a
4 life in which you can work together, learn
5 together, and be together. This is a great and
6 magnificent nation, and it is great because of
7 its young people.

8 And those of you who care so much,
9 and want to give so much to your school and to
10 your community that you as mediators volunteer
11 here today. On behalf of everyone, I thank you
12 for your willingness to undertake this.

13 And now I would like to ask if
14 anybody has any questions, I would be happy to
15 try to answer them. Any of the mediators?

16 Don't be shy.

17 It is amazing when I go back to the
18 Department of Justice and have -- did I see a
19 question out there? Do I see a hand half way
20 up over there?

21 One of the things that I would like
22 you to do because I have found that youngsters

1 ask me better questions, and they have got
2 better ideas about what Attorneys General
3 should be doing: Your principal has my
4 address, and if you have questions or
5 suggestions about what I, as Attorney General,
6 should be doing to promote mediation, to help
7 you end disputes without conflict, and without
8 knives and guns and fists, I want you to write
9 me.

10 Young people give me such good ideas.
11 Thank you all for including me here today.

12 (Whereupon, at 1:35 p.m., the
13 PRESENTATION was adjourned.)

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