

Sandra Day O'Connor Eulogy

*Hon. Ruth McGregor**

Today we mourn the death of Sandra Day O'Connor and gather to share our grief. But today is also a day to celebrate the life of this extraordinary woman.

We grieve and celebrate together because we are all connected to Sandra O'Connor in some way. For some, the connection is deeply personal; for others professional; others are connected through their love and admiration for this woman who brought so much to our lives.

My connection with Justice O'Connor followed many paths. As Justice O'Connor, she was my boss when I was a law clerk, my mentor, my role model, and my cheerleader when I needed one. When I became a judge, we worked as colleagues on projects related to judicial independence, civic education, and the rule of law.

As Sandra O'Connor, she played the role of a big sister—a very bossy big sister—and gave me advice about nearly everything: cooking, travel, how to handle difficult people, how to hit a forehand, and what roads to take and lane to be in when I drove us anywhere.

Most important of all, she was my friend and I loved her.

Much of the world thinks of Sandra O'Connor as the person who was The First Woman on the Supreme Court, a judge who was brilliant, strategic, determined, decisive and stern. She was all those things.

But the Sandra O'Connor we celebrate today was so much more: she was warm, loyal, funny, adventurous, loving and kind.

Throughout her career, Sandra O'Connor understood and embraced her ability to use her power and influence to encourage and help others. The first indication of just how great her influence would be came with the announcement of her nomination. Across the country women cheered, whether they were lawyers, judges, law students, elementary students, or people unconnected with the law. We felt empowered, energized and joyful. Everything became possible. Shouldering the weight of the hopes of so

* Former Chief Justice of the Arizona Supreme Court. This is a transcript of remarks delivered on February 12, 2024, at the Celebration of Life held for Justice Sandra Day O'Connor at the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University.

many could have been a heavy burden, but it was one Sandra O'Connor shouldered well.

Perhaps nowhere was her ability to influence and encourage more evident than in her relationships with her law clerks, the group she called her "second family."

Those of us fortunate enough to serve in the O'Connor chambers gained much more than a job for a year.

Justice O'Connor managed to make her chambers not just a workplace but a work home. Whether it was bringing in food for Saturday meetings or organizing seasonal celebrations, she was all in to strengthen her personal ties with the clerks, as well as with their families.

Now her personal warmth did not temper her ability to be a demanding boss. She expected the same of her clerks as she did of herself: that we do our very best, without complaint or excuse, and get things done. But in return, she gave us a lifetime of support and encouragement. She believed we could—and should—accomplish anything we were willing to work hard to do. And because she believed in us, we believed in ourselves. Who were we to question the Justice?

Her kindness enabled her to change the lives of so many.

One of the early indications I saw of Justice O'Connor using her position and innate kindness to impact the life of another happened early in her first term. She wanted to make a casserole that required tomatillos, not easily found in Washington in 1981. We went on a hunt, and found some canned tomatillos in a specialty grocery store. The young man who checked her out recognized her and, after gasping that he was a law student, carried her bags to the car, leaving other customers standing at his register.

The next day, she instructed me to find him and invite him and a friend to attend the next oral argument session.

On the appointed day, our new friends—both young men from the Outer Banks, one a law student at American and one at Howard—attended oral arguments, sitting in the special box reserved for guests of the Justices. When argument concluded, the young men were taken to her chambers for a private lunch with the Justice.

No one knew. No public relations announcement told of what she had done. But her kindness gave two young men an unforgettable day.

We cannot properly celebrate the life of Sandra O'Connor without celebrating her capacity for loving.

First and always foremost, she loved her family. She was forever grateful to John O'Connor for his unwavering support and willingness to adjust his life for hers. Theirs was a marriage we all envied, with just enough disagreement and bickering to let us know the relationship was real.

And, of course, the Justice was so proud of her sons. She loved watching them as they each became their own person, different from their parents and each other in as many ways as they were alike.

And she loved and welcomed her daughters-in-law and, of course, her grandchildren—the best-looking, most talented and smartest grandchildren in the world. If anyone ever doubted that a woman could perform in a high-pressure, high-visibility, difficult position and still have time to enjoy and take care of her family (and there were many who did), Sandra O'Connor gave us the answer.

Today we also celebrate and remember the love and loyalty she gave to and received from her many friends. When she left Phoenix for Washington, she left—physically left—a group of close, long-time friends; when she returned, her friends were waiting because she never really left them. Her circle of friends constantly expanded, but never to the exclusion of those already part of that circle.

No celebration of Sandra's life would be complete without acknowledging her special connection to and love of the West, its land and its people.

For many years, my husband Bob and I owned a home in southeastern Arizona, a place whose rolling grasslands, grazing cattle and distant mountains reminded the Justice of her beloved Lazy B, and she visited as often as she was able. Our activities with the Justice often included horseback riding, and we had access to the horses of a woman who raised and trained Peruvian Pasos.

On our first ride, which followed no safety rules and imposed no limits, the horses' owner pointed toward a utility pole far in the distance and said we would meet there. Sandra needed no further invitation; she left, cantering toward the pole, with the rest of us doing our best to keep up.

When we returned, Cowgirl Sandra pronounced the Pasos the most fabulous horses ever and bemoaned the fact that she had not discovered them seventy-five years earlier. During later years, we focused on bird-watching, visiting the local wineries, or four-wheeling through canyons where she could see and comment upon the condition of the free-ranging cattle. On one occasion, she insisted I find a way to contact the owner of

some cattle, whom I did not know, and inform him that it was imperative that someone check on the cattle NOW. He was understandably wary as I began my halting explanation. But when I said that the instruction came from Justice O'Connor, he assured me of immediate action. She had that impact on people.

The rural Arizona setting made her relaxed and reflective of her life on the ranch. One evening, as we watched the sunset, probably with a glass of local wine in hand, I mused that we likely would sell the property sometime in the next years. She immediately instructed me that we could not sell, that the property was irreplaceable, and that selling would be a serious mistake. I agreed. Peace restored.

Some years later, after Alzheimer's disease had accelerated its cruel attack on Justice O'Connor, we did sell our home. I never told her, so that we could go on making plans for her next visit.

Through our sadness and grief, we have so much to celebrate. We were all so fortunate to have Justice Sandra Day O'Connor as a part of our world and our lives. If ever there was a life well-lived and well-examined, it was the life of Sandra O'Connor. When asked the "tombstone question" she always replied that she would be content if inscribed on it were the words "Here lies a good judge."

If she would permit one final editing suggestion from a law clerk, I would propose that we add "And an even better person."

We love you and will miss you, Sandra.