

Tribute to Justice O'Connor

*Hon. Mary M. Schroeder**

Sandra Day was raised in the Tenth Circuit and spent her childhood among cowboys on the Lazy B Ranch that straddled Arizona and New Mexico. She rode real horses, not rocking horses, and her first pet was a bobcat. She became a true daughter of the Ninth Circuit after she went to Stanford, married John O'Connor, and settled in Phoenix. When I moved to Phoenix in 1969, she was working in the State Attorney General's Office, one of only about a half-dozen women lawyers in town. I interviewed for a job at her husband's firm only to be told that they would never hire a woman lawyer, but one of their partner's was married to one. I didn't know whether they were bragging or complaining. Sandra went on to run for the legislature and became majority leader of the State Senate before going on the State trial bench.

Our careers were intertwined. When she and I were both state court judges in 1974, we both ran in Arizona's first merit selection retention election, both using our full names to highlight our Irish heritage—she as Sandra Day O'Connor, and I as Mary Murphy Schroeder. She led everyone, I was a little behind, and the male judges were left in the dust. When President Carter appointed me to the Ninth Circuit, Sandra took my seat on the Arizona Court of Appeals. Sandra possessed a rare combination of intellect and ability to connect with people. Soon after she took her seat on that relatively lowly court, President Reagan, recognizing her talents, took the extraordinary step of elevating her to the United States Supreme Court. In 1981 she went from relative obscurity to immortality as "The First."

Sandra served as our Circuit Justice for nearly twenty years, and for five of those years Sandra and I were the first all-woman team of Circuit Justice and Chief Circuit Judge. She enjoyed coming to our conferences and we enjoyed having her, even when she tried to correct errors in our ways. She was a born teacher and mentor of countless law clerks, and one of her last public appearances was the swearing in of her former law clerk, Michelle Friedland, to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

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What I remember and admire most about Sandra is this: although she was raised with cowboys in a remote corner of the West, she found herself in a more public role of decision maker than any woman in our nation's history. As the first woman on the Supreme Court she spent her life as an icon with little privacy. I saw Sandra at countless barbeques, cocktail receptions, dinners, speeches and of course all those panels about the work of the Supreme Court and what it was like to be the "First." Through it all, and for more than twenty-five years, Sandra was constantly in the spotlight, always surrounded by admiring throngs—particularly of young women and girls—and never able to let her guard down. This must have been an enormous burden, but Sandra handled it all with unceasing grace and charm.

Sandra retired from the Supreme Court in 2006, due in large part to the illness of her husband, John, and returned to Arizona. She did not retreat from public life however, but continued to speak out, turning her formidable gifts of persuasion to the need for increasing public knowledge about our government. Her name became synonymous with civics education through her support of the program known as iCivics to improve the knowledge of young people about our government. She would have been delighted to know of our Circuit's Civics Contest and would cheer the winners. For Sandra, it was not about herself, but about service and good citizenship.