

BARBARA LA WALL
AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE
LEARNED HAND AWARD ACCEPTANCE REMARKS
MARCH 14, 2012

Thank you. No one ever climbs the ladder of success without help from many others along the way. So my thanks and gratitude go out to the many folks who have been there for me.

My heartfelt thanks to Judge Kevin Lyons for leaving Peoria in mid-March to come all the way to the sunny southwest just to give such a great introduction. Working with you at the National District Attorney's Association has truly been one of the high points of my career. It is a real privilege to know you B and to call you my friend. You are a true mensch.

My gratitude to my family and to my sister, Susie and my niece, Cori, who love and support me just because I am family. Thanks to my exceptional friends, Sonja, Dave, Kathryn, Carole. You nurture me, and feed my spirit -- as well as my stomach. I love you guys.

I am grateful to my fellow Arizona prosecutors -- and other professional colleagues who are here for their friendship and support. You are exceptional public servants, a credit to our professions. I am so very thankful to my devoted assistant, Isabel Smutzer. Regardless of the circumstances, you always remain cheerful, positive and supportive. I love you, dearly.

Thanks to my dedicated staff. It is your hard work, and your commitment to public safety and public service that make it possible for me to receive this honor. I am especially grateful to my awesome and amazing Chief Deputy, Amelia Cramer, who practices with the utmost integrity and the highest ethics and who supports me unconditionally.

Most important, I am grateful to my daughter, Sara who came from California to be here. She is not a lawyer. She is a working mom, a religious education director and a seminary student passionately dedicated to social justice. Sara you always make me so proud. You are the joy of my life and I love you so very much.

I have been a public prosecutor for the last 36 years, and I believe I have the very best job in the world. The work that I get to do every day is profoundly special and meaningful. Every day I get the opportunity to make a living and also make a difference.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said: Every man, every woman, should be a part of the action and the passion of the times they live in. Every single day I get to use my God-given talents to improve the human condition. Every day, I get to fight for safe streets, secure homes and the American quality of life. Every day I have the privilege and the opportunity to be part of the action and the passion of our times.

My grandparents were Jewish immigrants from Russia and Lithuania who came to the United States to find the American dream. My parents were the first in their families to even graduate from high school. And my sister and I were the first generation of college graduates.

My going to law school exceeded everyone's expectations. Growing up I never imagined that one day I would be a lawyer -- let alone that I would eventually run for public office and become the elected prosecutor of my hometown.

Long before Law and Order, there were no role model TV prosecutors. There was only the hapless, hopeless Hamilton Berger who got outclassed, outwitted, and outgunned every week by Perry Mason. So as a law student, I never aspired to be a prosecutor.

We've all heard of the accidental tourist the traveler who embarks on a journey only to unintentionally end up someplace else. But perhaps, as William Burroughs said, that when traveling through life there really are no accidents.

Mid-way in law school I found myself desperately needing a job. Private law firms had no openings but the prosecutor's office was hiring. Thus began my accidental career as a prosecutor.

I loved clerking in the prosecutor's office. The legal issues were challenging. The attorneys were dynamic and fascinating. The cases were intriguing and engaging. The cops were charismatic. Everything moved at a fast and furious pace. The work was noble and served the public good. I was hooked.

I signed up to do my internship and was able to try misdemeanor cases in Justice Court. My first big case was a misdemeanor disorderly conduct stemming from a neighborhood dispute. One neighbor was very upset with another neighbor over a barking dog.

It felt very grave and serious. So I studied the facts. I researched the statutes and law. I practiced my opening statement and my closing argument. I know this sounds completely ridiculous looking back on it. But it was my first case in my whole career. And what happened?

After hearing my opening statement, and before I had a chance to call a witness, the judge ordered the parties into mediation. Mediation? I'm litigating my first case and I'm still in law school. I really wanted to be 1 and 0. I really wanted to actually win the case.

The judge must have seen the look of utter disappointment on my face because he took me aside to explain why a trial was not the best way to resolve this particular case. This JP was not a lawyer. He was a wise, elderly Greek man. I was assigned to his courtroom for many months, and through this experience, I began to understand the nature of providing justice.

Over the next twenty years as a Deputy County Attorney, I learned what it really meant to be a successful prosecutor. And ... what it did not mean. It did not mean locking up as many people as possible, for as long as possible. It did not mean applying a reflexive, mechanical application of the criminal law to wrong-doers. To be a good prosecutor, I learned that one must have an understanding of people and their motivations, and have the wisdom to figure out the best and most appropriate course of action.

I learned that a good prosecutor must also have a profound capacity for fairness, compassion, empathy, and public service. And I worked hard to practice these traits myself, particularly with all the victims I encountered. As a prosecutor, and as a person, I have been forever changed by the thousands of victims I have met and served.

So this award is really not for me. It is for every nameless, faceless victim of crime. This award is for all the persons whose lives have been unalterably shattered and immutably changed by having been victimized.

It is for the multitude of tiny babies and little children who have been molested, sexually abused, and physically beaten and battered. For the innocents who have been abandoned and neglected, and for those little ones who have perished at the hands of the persons they most loved and trusted. This award is for all the men and women who have been victims of brutal sexual assault, and domestic violence. And for all the brave family members who have survived the loss of loved ones through murder.

My heart and my thanks go out to all victims of crime for the inspiration and strength they provide on a daily basis by allowing me to hear their stories, and for sharing their personal heartache and pain. For teaching me how to have an open heart, and for changing my life forever, I am eternally grateful.

I am most grateful to the American Jewish Committee for this tremendous and most prestigious honor. Thank you so very much.