

The Legacy of Justice Mary Ann G. McMorrow

By Michele M. Jochner

I consider it one of my life's greatest blessings to have known Justice Mary Ann G. McMorrow for nearly two decades. I first met her not long after she was elected in 1992 as the first female justice to sit on the Illinois Supreme Court, this state's highest tribunal. That stellar achievement was only one of the many ground-breaking firsts of her incredible career that have been repeatedly heralded. Justice McMorrow was *the* role model for our generation of women lawyers. She overcame numerous barriers and accomplished so much, all with grace and humility. She was the one we all looked up to.

A few years later, in 1997, I joined Justice McMorrow's staff as one of her Judicial Law Clerks and served in that capacity for nine years, until her retirement from the bench in 2006. Working closely with this legal legend offered me an incredible opportunity not only to learn about the letter of the law, but also to become inspired through Justice McMorrow's vision of the spirit of the law.

Justice McMorrow loved the law and the lawyers who practice it. She also had great respect for the power the law gives to us to right wrongs and help those in need. One of her favorite roles as a Justice on the Illinois Supreme Court was to participate in the swearing-in ceremonies of



Justice McMorrow, with Justice Stevens at his dinner in 2010. Photo by Bill Richert.

new lawyers to the Illinois bar. Invariably, when she spoke of becoming a member of the legal profession, she would remind the candidates that it is both an honor and a privilege to be a lawyer. It is an honor because lawyers have the power to affect people's lives. It is a privilege because we have the duty to exercise this power with the highest standards of integrity, justice, and fairness. Justice McMorrow stressed that the legal profession is one of public service. She led by example, underscoring that it is also important for lawyers to give back to their profession and their community through bar association activities and involvement in community or charitable work.

Over the years, Justice McMorrow became my trusted mentor and treasured friend. We talked regularly and I looked forward to our breakfast get-togethers during which we would catch up on the latest developments.

The night I learned of Justice McMorrow's passing, I remembered that I had video recorded an event a few months earlier during which awards were bestowed

that were named in her honor. I had set up the camera off to the side of the podium, and although the line of sight was not optimal, it nevertheless captured the moment. After learning of Justice McMorrow's death, I viewed the video for the first time since that event. What was on that recording turned out to be more priceless than I ever imagined.

That evening, Justice McMorrow, unexpectedly, delivered formal remarks to the assembled crowd, which included a large number of law students and newly-minted lawyers, all ready and eager to embark upon their legal careers. Her words enthralled us all with their beauty and poignancy. They were perhaps the last formal remarks she made.

Her immortal words serve both as an instruction to our newer lawyers and as a reminder to us more seasoned members of the bar, of what it means to be part of this wonderful legal profession. Let us always carry her words with us.

At her funeral, it was said of Justice McMorrow that, in her life, "she got it right." There can be no better legacy for any of us to have. ■

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Remarks of Justice Mary Ann G. McMorrow

Transcribed by Michele M. Jochner

Delivered at the Hon. Mary Ann G. McMorrow Distinguished Service to the Profession Award Ceremony

Hosted by the Chicago Alumni Chapter of the Phi Alpha Delta Law Fraternity, Int'l.

October 25, 2012

“There are many things I would like to tell you today, but one of the most important thoughts I can hope to leave you with is that you should always strive to rise above, and not be content with mediocrity. Truly great men and women work hard. It is the extra effort, doing above what is expected, that distinguishes the extraordinary from the ordinary and the excellent from the good. Live and work and play intensely; but never lose your ideals. Set your goals high. We can be—and we must be—a pervasive influence for good in both our profession and in the broader society. Never, ever, forget that ours is a noble profession. You must respect it, and, by your upstanding conduct, command the respect of others for it. Be the best that you can be. I particularly ask this of the students here this evening who are just embarking upon their careers: strive to be the best that you can become. Do not compromise or settle for anything less.

At the end of Mahatma Ghandi’s life, a life which inspired the world with his ethic of nonviolence, he was asked what was the one thing which frustrated him the most. He answered that he was most frustrated by the hard heartedness of educated people. I will tell you, in my opinion, that lawyers are good people. They are compassionate. Lawyers help those in need. But let us never be, in the words of Ghandi, hard hearted because we are educated. Rather, let us be learned and skilled, but never lose sight of our own humanity, and the humanity of others. Let us remember the humanity of those who we work with and those whom we judge. Let us never, ever, forget simple humanity. Let us never forget that the law is, first and foremost, about human beings and their problems. It is my hope that every challenge that you encounter will allow you to work, to grow and to be better for the experience. Thank you so very much for allowing me to say a few words this evening.”

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