

PROFILES IN CITIZENSHIP: HOW TO KEEP THE REPUBLIC



© Marc Royce/Corbis Outline

Sandra Day O'Connor

Sandra Day O'Connor graduated third in her class at Stanford Law School in 1952, only to find the doors of private law firms shut to her when she sought to practice law. Instead, she was asked about her typing skills by male employers who insisted that their clients would not accept legal counsel from a woman. So instead, she launched herself on a public career that coursed through years in the attorney general's office in Arizona, the Arizona Senate, and the state bench, and would finally hit its dramatic peak twenty-nine years later, when President Ronald Reagan appointed her as the first female justice on the U.S. Supreme Court. We spoke with O'Connor on March 3, 2005. Here's her advice for students.

On what she'd tell today's students about how one person can make a difference:

Of course [you] have to have courage, you have to learn to believe in yourself, and to do that you have to develop some skills. So learn to read fast, and to write well, that's what you need to learn to do as a student. I have to read something like 1,500 pages a day. Now I couldn't do that if I hadn't taken speed reading. And that's important. I'm serious. You don't realize how important it is to be able to read fast. Because if you can read fast, think of all you can learn. . . . And then have courage to believe that, yes, you are equipped to do something, and go do it.

On keeping the republic:

You know, I've always said that we don't inherit our knowledge and understanding through the gene pool. And every new generation has to learn all over again the foundations of our government, how it was set up and why, and what is every individual's role in it. And we have to convey that to every generation . . . [i]f every young generation of citizens [doesn't] have an understanding of this, we can't keep our nation in decent order for the future.