

JUSTICE FOR ALL

The Legal Services Corporation Celebrates 30 Years

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ONE OF THE GREAT PRIVILEGES of this office is the opportunity to engage with so many legal organizations that shine the bright light of hope upon our country and bring honor to our profession. In my work, I have met lawyers of such extraordinary purpose, dedication and idealism that a thousand columns would never bring enough credit nor make the case clearly enough.

A few months ago, I was privileged to be a part of the 30th anniversary celebration of one such organization that has become a standard-bearer of all that is good about our profession, of all we stand for and work for: the Legal Services Corp. If you're not familiar with this historic, results-oriented group of men and women, you should be, since their work resides at the very heart of what it means to be a lawyer.

Created by an act of Congress in 1974, the LSC is an independent, nonprofit corporation funded by the federal government. Its work is multifaceted, but its mission is really quite simple: "Equal justice under the law."

We are all familiar with this phrase. We learn it in civics class, explore its consequence to our democracy in law school, and see it etched on courthouse walls nationwide. Essentially, it holds that justice, as an inalienable right, should never be determined by financial well-being or station in life. After all, it is justice that protects our innocence, punishes our corruption and encourages our ingenuity. Justice for everyone is the prerequisite for a healthy, prosperous and peaceful society.

Of course, simply declaring this founding tenet of our democracy does not make it a reality. Practical application requires the legal profession—the link between citizens and their system of justice—to do everything it can to bring the hopefulness of our system to those who require it. The LSC stands at the forefront of this cause by provid-

ing thousands of small, everyday victories that, while never mentioned on the evening news, have a profound effect on the lives of so many. LSC programs provide civil legal assistance to Americans who are eligible under the federal poverty guidelines. The programs assist with the very basic concerns of everyday life, such as domestic violence, employment, housing, health care and fraud.

As it is with all great organizations of high purpose, the LSC was the inspiration of great leaders. The LSC and its predecessor, the legal services program of the Office of Economic Opportunity (part of President Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty"), would never have been created without people like U.S. Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell. As president of the ABA in 1964, Powell provided essential support for a federally funded program. In a remarkable speech to the ABA House of Delegates, Powell declared that justice "should be the same, in substance and availability, without regard to economic status."

HELP US MEET THE CHALLENGE

THROUGH THE YEARS, WHILE PROVIDING EXTRAORDINARY service to communities around the country, the LSC has faced great challenges as well. In the 1980s and '90s, its very existence was threatened by those who felt that equal justice under the law was not important enough or threatened enough to justify any federal assistance at all. Under this assault, the legal community, and the ABA most prominently, rose up and argued successfully that if a victim of domestic violence, a tenant being bullied illegally or a child needing a custody resolution cannot seek remedy due to a lack of resources, then it is not just they who are harmed but the entire American enterprise itself.

Because of the efforts of lawyers, the LSC enjoys greater support on Capitol Hill today. Yet challenges remain. The number of Americans eligible for LSC-funded programs now exceeds 43 million and is growing while federal appropriations remain flat. While the ABA will continue to keep the LSC among the highest of its legislative priorities, it is incumbent on the U.S. legal pro-

profession—lawyers like you and me—to join this cause.

I was deeply inspired by Justice Powell, and I've spent every day of my professional life trying to live up to the example he set. We can all honor his memory and the ideals he set forth by taking a stand for the organization he helped create. I urge every one of you reading this page to contact your legislators and voice your support for the Legal Services Corp.

To be sure, there are great demands on this country and on our government's scarce resources. But I can think of no higher priority than equal justice under the law. ■



President Grey: The LSC is our standard-bearer.