

Philadelphia Naturalization Ceremony
October 18, 2007

“Good morning my fellow citizens; my brother and sister Americans. I am truly honored to address you this morning.

I want to talk today about promises—the solemn covenant that Americans make to one another through our Constitution, as we live it today. This is a promise that all Americans will have access to the benefits of our society. All means all. We promise that the door will be open regardless of your race, your gender, disability, nationality, ethnicity, disability or poverty.

In 1941, as war was already raging in the rest of the world, Franklin Roosevelt talked about this promise as the Four Freedoms: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear,

As the President told Congress: “That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation. That kind of world is the very antithesis of the so-called new order of tyranny which the dictators seek to create with the crash of a bomb.”

These promises are hard to keep. They are impossible to keep. We have never kept them.

But we try. And on the front lines are an extraordinary group of people in this nation: public interest lawyers. Public interest lawyers are lawyers who spend their lives working to keep those promises and to change the systems that deny people school, or health care or a house or a job to a person because of their race, or their gender or their disability or their poverty.

We are especially endowed in this City of Brotherly Love with a rich group of public interest organizations: the Woman’s Law Project; The Homeless Advocacy Project; the Senior Law Project; the Juveniles Law Center, the Education Law Center, to name only a few.

My organization, the Public Interest Law Center, is among the oldest. We work on the systems that break our promises to large groups of people. We started in the 1960s, when Americans from all over the nation were traveling to the south to protest laws that kept black people and white people apart. Southern officials were arresting and jailing the protesters and refusing to allow demonstrations. President Kennedy, looking at all this wondered aloud: “Where are the lawyers?” Lawyers are people who have the skills to help these protesters—why aren’t they involved?

Lawyers from all around the country responded to this call. They formed committees: Lawyers Committees for Civil Rights Under Law. They traveled south and represented those protesters, adding power and momentum to that movement. Eventually all of those

laws and policies were abolished—it was no longer lawful to separate black people and white people.

Here in Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Bar Association decided that the powerful work of the Lawyers Committee should continue. In 1974, the leaders of the Bar incorporated the Philadelphia Lawyers Committee as the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia.

Since then, we have taken on large challenges: some of the biggest broken promises. In the 1970s, it was illegal for children with disabilities to go to school. We brought a lawsuit that opened the school doors for children with disabilities and led to a federal law guaranteeing that right.

Today, federal law ensures that our poorest children have basic health care so that they will have an opportunity to grow up into healthy, happy, productive adults. But around the country that law is ignored by the officials who have the responsibilities—we bring lawsuits against the government officials who are ignoring them.

Here in Pennsylvania, we do not spend enough money to make sure that every child leaves public school with all of the tools to enter the work force and assume the responsibilities of citizenship. The Law Center is working with other groups around the Commonwealth to change that and make sure that every child has an opportunity, whether she lives in a rich or a poor area.

We public interest lawyers are not alone in the work. We are helped by lawyers of all kinds who donate some of their time to help others. We are helped by people of all types who support our work or who deliver direct health, education or other services.

I expect that you will, or have already, encountered one or many broken promises in our sacred covenant with one another. But you will hold the knowledge of these public interest lawyers dedicated to keeping those promises—you or your children or your grandchildren may even become one of us. I know that this knowledge will sustain you and the powerful hope that brought you to this place and this joyous day.

GOOD LUCK AND THANK YOU.”

Jennifer R. Clarke
Executive Director
The Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia
Distinguished Guest Speaker