

Lunch with Justice Ginsburg, 9/12/08

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Symeon Symeonides, I am Dean of Willamette University College of Law, and on behalf of the faculty, students, and staff of the College it is my pleasure to welcome you to this celebration. It's a big day for us, because today we begin celebrating the 125th anniversary of Willamette University's College of Law.

In 1842, seventeen years before Oregon became a state, Willamette University was born, the child of both the foresight and sacrifice of Methodist missionaries. Willamette was the first university in the West, destined to provide intellectual sustenance to the children of pioneers and later the whole region.

By 1866, Willamette established the first medical school in the region and, by 1883, a law school, our College of Law. At that time, there were only 51 law schools in the United States, of which only 37 survive to date among the 194 law schools now in existence. All but 7 of those schools were located east of the Mississippi River, and all but one (Hastings, 1878) were east of the Rocky Mountains. Thus, Willamette's law school was the second law school in the West and the first in the Northwest.

125 years later, we are the beneficiaries of the vision and hard labor of those pioneers and their successors. During this time, the College of Law has excelled in all of its endeavors, continuing to be a pioneer in legal education, even after it began sharing the field with many other fine law schools. It has produced outstanding graduates who have served the profession and their communities with honor and distinction throughout the United States — on the bench and the bar, in state and national government, in Fortune 500 companies and in nonprofit agencies.

I am delighted to see so many of them here today. I am also particularly humbled to see some of our benefactors, like Ken and Claudia Peterson, Maribeth Collins, Cherida Collins Smith, Melvin Henderson Rubio, Rick and Barbara Wollenberg, Mary Hughes, Susan Hammer, and Brian Erb.

As we celebrate this significant milestone in the school's history, we take time to reflect on those dedicated professors, graduates, staff, and benefactors who, each in their own way, have helped make our school so special. No individual who has entered through the doors of the College of Law, in its many homes, has come out unchanged; and each one

acknowledged that he was “just not ready to hire a woman.” This was in 1958!

You would also think that any one with Ruth Ginsburg’s credentials would have no difficulty getting a job with a prestigious New York Law firm, on or off Wall Street. Not so!

She did succeed in finding a federal district judge (Judge Edmund L. Palmieri) who was willing to hire women, and then took a research position at Columbia’s Project on International Civil Procedure. She learned Swedish in record time, translated the Swedish Code of Civil Procedure into English, and wrote a book about it, while building the foundations that to this day make her the best procedural lawyer to either argue before the Court or to sit on it.

In 1963, Ruth Ginsburg began her teaching career at Rutgers law school, one of the few law schools that hired women. Yet, when she became pregnant with her second child, she had every reason to be afraid that she would be fired if her pregnancy became known. So she decided to hide her pregnancy during the Spring semester with the help of a larger size wardrobe borrowed from her mother-in-law. Her second child was born just before classes started in the fall semester.

I don’t know if Ruth Ginsburg got mad; but I know that she got even. Through her path-breaking scholarship, but also through her creative lawyering, she succeeded, almost single-handedly, in changing the law on sex discrimination. In 1972, she founded and directed the Women’s Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, and – in a manner reminiscent of the path earlier followed by Thurgood Marshal in racial discrimination cases – she argued and won several landmark sex-discrimination cases before the Supreme Court.

Thus, the woman who would not be hired as a clerk on that Court was now arguing and winning cases before it. And in 1993, that same woman became a member of that august body of demigods. And she has already left an indelible imprint on the Court’s jurisprudence.

Madame Justice, we and millions of our fellow citizens thank you for all the fights you have fought and continue to fight, for your persistence and perseverance; and we are grateful for your decision to travel this far to add distinction and luster to our celebration.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my distinct honor to present to you The Honorable Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court.