

PHOTOCOPY
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LEGAL AID SOCIETY DINNER

THE WHITE HOUSE

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT THE LEGAL AID SOCIETY DINNER

New York, NY

MRS. CLINTON: I want to thank the Legal Aid Society. I am delighted to be here among all of you who are supporters of legal aid and particularly of the Legal Aid Society. I want to thank those of you who had so much work to do to put together this dinner, and particularly acknowledge Mr. Murray (phonetic) and Mr. Brone (phonetic) for their leadership. And I am very pleased to have the opportunity to share this award with Marty Lipton (phonetic). And I especially appreciate what he had to say this evening. I also want to say a special word of thanks to all who were dinner chairs for this dinner. At least two of them have been my lawyers. Several others I admire, and appreciate greatly their contributions to this city and state, as well as to our country.

I am pleased to be here because this award means a great deal to me, coming as it does from people whose work I appreciate and respect. And coming as it does with so much support from the private bar, which has really been the backbone for the movement for Legal Services, from its inception. Over the years, as those of you who support and work with the Legal Aid Society know so well, this Society has been the true servant of justice, not only as the oldest organized provider of legal services to the poor, but also as the largest. Year after year, you have set records for the generous support that is provided for the civil and volunteer divisions. And the volunteer division itself continues to be a model for meaningful and effective pro bono involvement.

And I particularly want to thank Lane (phonetic) for her introduction, for her personal friendship and support, but also for pointing out that there is this great partnership between the Legal Services Corporation and the work that you do here every day, and particularly in support of the volunteer division. I congratulate you, particularly all of you who are currently on the staff, for the contributions you have made and are making to the cause of equal justice. And I know that the President joins me in urging you to keep up the good work you are doing in spite of the obstacles you confront as we as a nation attempt to navigate through uncharted and sometimes unfriendly waters.

I would also like to acknowledge the importance of Alex Forger to the Legal Services Corporation. While I know he is missed here in New York, we are fortunate to have his leadership and talents in Washington. And he is doing a magnificent job at perhaps the most critical moment in the life of the Legal Services Corporation. We are very grateful for that, Alex.

Coming here tonight, I was reminded of my first real involvement with legal aid when I was in law school and I worked at the New Haven Legal Service Organization, which many of you know was one of the first Ford Foundation model projects to determine whether legal aid could be delivered efficiently to the poor based on a stack model. I was immediately impressed by the commitment of the lawyers and the work that was being done struck me as what the profession at bottom was really about.

When I next was involved with legal services, it was when I began teaching at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas. And I did not know that I was going to have the opportunity to teach, because at that time it was the summer of 1974 and I was engaged in another enterprise in Washington, serving on the impeachment staff of President Nixon's inquiry. (Applause) And when that ended, I was out of a job, and I called the dean of the law school, where a young man I had met during my own law school years was then teaching, and said that, "You once mentioned when I met you that if I wanted to teach, I would give you a call, so I thought maybe I'd give you a call." And he said, "Sure, you can come have a job. That's easy." And I asked, "What would I teach?" And he said, "I don't know, I'll tell you when you get here." So I showed up in late August of 1974 and he said, "Well, I want you to teach criminal law and run the legal aid clinic, and run the two prison projects for the state and federal prisons, and by the way, I want you to teach trial advocacy." That was sort of the way law schools work. I had no experience doing any of those things and immediately began trying to figure out how to start.

The very first evening I was in town ready to take on these new responsibilities, I was invited to the local County Bar Association's welcoming cocktail party for the law school faculty. The lawyer who was then the President of the local bar took me around introducing me to everyone. He introduced me to the Dean of the Chancery Court judges, by saying, "Judge, this is the new lady law professor. She is going to teach criminal law and run the Legal Aid clinic." And the judge looked down at me and said, "Well, I don't have a use for either lady law professors or legal aid clinics." And I thought, well, I'm certainly getting off on the right foot here. I always have a little trouble getting my footing in new setting in case you haven't noticed. (Laughter and applause)

But I found as many of you who find every day, and as many of you who are veterans of the legal services efforts have found in the past, that we often encounter people like that judge who

do not believe in legal services for the poor. He found all kinds of ancient statutes, going all the way back before the Magna Carta, to point out that it was illegal, immoral, impractical, and otherwise totally un-American to provide legal services for pro bono matters for simple cases. Over time, he became used to the fact, but not accepting of it, that legal Services was to stay.

And I thought that that really was the way we could describe most of the country until the past several months. I'm reminded of my own experiences because I know that it was replicated in so many communities, and is still being lived out in courtrooms and offices all over the nation. And that now we face the greatest possible challenge to the future of the provision of legal services. It has been 21 years now since the birth of this great enterprise, the Legal Services Corporation. And the LSC grantees, including the Legal Aid Society, have assisted millions and millions of people. Mothers seeking child support from absent fathers, children without access to health care, families facing homelessness, tenants living in intolerable housing conditions, welfare recipients seeking training for child care so they can work, nursing home residents deprived of the most basic care, victims of spousal abuse...and I can, as I know you are able, go on and on.

The work of Legal Services has been amplified by the pro bono participation of the many thousands of private attorneys who consider it part of their professional obligations. Federal funding and other funding has been leveraged by charitable contributions such as yours. And I know we have to continue to urge the private bar to become even more supportive, no matter what happens on the state or federal level. Many of the people here understand that and I hope will carry that message to your compatriots in our profession.

We are going to be facing a very difficult challenge in the months ahead. And I'm hoping that we will be able to demonstrate clearly why the provision of legal services to those otherwise unable to afford them is not only the right thing to do for those individual clients, but is essential for the quality of justice available to all our citizens. I know that this is particularly important because poor children are suffering special burdens and poor people today are facing an even greater array of obstacles. And tragically, in today's political climate, poor children and their families are likely to be viewed less as objects of concern, but as culprits for everything that goes wrong with society.

I recently heard a sermon in which the minister related a story in Leviticus about the ancient Israelites who annually placed all of their miseries and sins on the head of a goat. And then sent that goat off into the wilderness. And when the goat reached the wilderness, the tribe felt cleansed of all problems, all evils, all sins. That, unfortunately, is an apt parable for

what is happening in America today. In today's society, the scapegoat is poor children and their parents. And somehow, we think we can rid ourselves of all our social problems by scapegoating children and exiling them to a wilderness of greater poverty and homelessness.

So today, we find ourselves at a crucial moment in our own history, when the very notion of what we stand for as a society is at stake. Our constitution reminds us that the twin purposes of government are to secure the blessings of liberty and to establish justice. And as the President said last year in the Proclamation for National Legal Services Week, "The very nature of justice demands that it be available to all. True justice cannot be rationed, it cannot be afforded to some while others are denied the full benefit of their rights. Our Founders understood that privilege and responsibility are inextricably linked. The words 'equal justice under the law,' inscribed over the portal of our nation's highest court, represent a sound promise made to every American." I hope all of you will be sure that your voices are heard over the next weeks and months. Because all of us need those voices, but particularly the clients and the potential clients are counting on you. I hope all of you will help remind America that Legal Services is not just about providing legal help, but about offering proof that the American Dream is a promise we are still committed to fulfilling.

Let me conclude by offering a prayer by the South African poet, Alan Payton (phonetic). It seems fitting tonight, and it seems a little sad to me that it does. Here's what he said.

"Open my eyes that I may see the needs of others.
Open my ears that I may hear their cries.
Open my heart so that they need not be without succor.
Let me not be afraid to defend the weak because of the
 anger of the strong.
Nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of
 the rich.
Show me where love and hope and faith are needed and
 use me to bring them to those places.
So open my eyes and my ears that I may this coming day
 be able to do some work of peace for Thee.

Protecting legal services for those who need the help of lawyers is a historic cause, and with your help we will continue America's commitment to justice, so that all of us in our own way will be servants of justice. Thank you very much. (Applause)

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