

“Civic education in the United States is not good enough and we have to do something about it.”

Wow, when I heard these words spoken by Justice Souter last summer in Chicago during his address to the American Bar Association, he immediately got my attention. As I listened to his words, delivered in his unassuming and quiet New England demeanor, his passion for this issue became clear. He told us how concerned he is “about the risk to our constitutional government when a substantial portion of the American populous simply fails to gain the understanding of how the government works.” I was surprised to learn that about two-thirds of the people in the United States cannot even name all three branches of the national government. “This is something to worry about,” he said. And I agree. Justice Souter went on to challenge the audience of lawyers and judges asking us “to consider the danger to judicial independence when people have no conception of how the judiciary fits within the constitutional scheme.”



Justice Souter recalled a famous conversation that occurred shortly after the Constitutional Convention of 1787 when a woman asked Benjamin Franklin, “What kind of government do we have?” And Franklin replied, “A republic if you

can keep it.” Franklin, Justice Souter passionately said, “understood a republic can be lost. And one way it may be lost is by a kind of erosion in the minds of its people. It will be lost by citizens who lack the understanding or feel responsible for preserving the constitutional government that they have... We have to revive the basic civic knowledge that once came naturally...”

I too have always had a passion for civics, law and government and that passion was re-energized after listening to Justice Souter. It moved me to heed his call to action and make civics education a priority initiative during my year as PBA president. I was reminded of George Washington’s argument to Congress in his 1796 State of the Union address, when he said, “A primary object...should be the education of our youth in the science of government. In a republic, what species of knowledge can be equally important? And what duty more pressing...than communicating it to those who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the country?”

Souter, Washington and many others have told us that we have to communicate to the next generation about the values, uniqueness and importance of our constitution and the government it created. In her own practical, common sense approach, Justice O’Connor expressed it this way, “Knowledge of our Constitution and the role of our courts is not handed down in the gene pool. Each

generation must learn about our system of government and the citizen's role."

Borrowing from yet another Supreme Court justice who has been equally passionate about the need for civic education in our schools, I share Justice Anthony Kennedy's views urging that democracy and the principles of the Constitution have to be taught. Justice Kennedy said, "... it's of vital importance that our young people know the meaning of the Constitution. You don't take a DNA test to see if you believe in freedom. It's taught. Teaching and learning are a conscious act. That's how our heritage is handed down from one generation to the next."

You'll find links to Justice O'Connor's iCivics educational web site as well as Justice Souter's and Justice Kennedy's remarks on our webpage (www.pabar.org/lre.asp) and I urge you to explore these resources and to share them with others, most importantly with our young people. No one is too young to begin learning about the value and importance of our Constitution and government. Wonderful resources have

been developed by top educators to teach preschool children about fundamental principles of authority, justice, responsibility and privacy. You'll find simple and engaging lessons that you can use in visits with elementary, middle and high school students. Please take a moment to reach out to your local school this year, but particularly during the PBA's Celebrate the Constitution program.

I leave you with this moving thought from Justice Kennedy, "We must remember that it's not just officials, the president, who have the obligation to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution. It's all of your obligations. But, you cannot preserve, what you do not revere. You cannot protect, what you do not comprehend. You cannot defend, what you do not know."

"Civic education in the United States is not good enough and we have to do something about it." Souter said.

Help us make sure every child learns something about our Constitution and government and knows something about the rights and responsibilities of being a United States citizen.