

Remarks by Norman Dorsen on receiving the first triennial award of the Association of American Law Schools for lifetime contributions to the law and to legal education, January 4, 2007. The award was presented by John Sexton, President of New York University

John, I greatly appreciate your coming to Washington to make this presentation and your many kind words, even when you shamelessly exaggerate.

Above all, I thank you all so very much for the honor you have bestowed on me. I can think of no other that would mean as much, coming as it does from my peers and colleagues in so many different undertakings. I confess that, along with the pride, I have felt considerable apprehension about being able to convey meaningfully and briefly all that this award means to me.

I recognize that my career in some important respects has not followed the conventional or traditional. When NYU hired me in early 1961 to direct its fledgling Arthur Garfield Hays Civil Liberties Program the leading American legal academics were men – there were almost no women – who were often brilliant and productive scholars and teachers. I admired them greatly. Yet I took a different route. While I worked hard on scholarship and classroom teaching (hence the 14 books John mentioned), I also regularly participated in litigation, served on diverse public bodies, brought the Hays Civil

Liberties Fellows and other students into public interest careers, and worked to build from the inside new and lasting institutions, including a stronger NYU Law School.

Two respected law professors of my youth, in a sincere attempt to help me, were moved to ask -- with obvious skepticism -- whatever was I thinking in going down my chosen path. There were a few exceptions in those days, most notably Tom Emerson of Yale Law School, a former New Dealer who was a path breaker in the field of civil liberties; I am proud to have co-authored a book with him. But on the whole it is no exaggeration to say that the reigning generation of law deans and professors in my early days, despite their great talents, did not value an alternative type of career.

Accordingly, my selection for this award inevitably validates the KIND of work that I have done, its goals as well as specific achievements. By the same token, and in a very real sense, the award is also for all of my colleagues who share these goals, who labor through their teaching, scholarship, public activities and within their law schools to bring about a more just society, more socially conscious students and a more rigorous and caring form of legal education.

There is of course no one way to be a good law professor. Those who contribute through traditional scholarship and teaching greatly advance our profession and deepen our understanding of the law. Each of us inevitably goes down a road that is the product of many personal qualities, some barely discernible, and of circumstances that are varied,

unpredictable and often mysterious. The key, in my view, is to aim high and to look outward as well as inward, abroad as well as to the United States.

Countless colleagues, students and friends have given me indispensable help along the way. They have been my comrades at NYU Law School, the ACLU, the Society of American Law Teachers, and many other organizations. I thank them all.

Three people stand out, and I mention their names aware that I may be slighting others, to whom I apologize in advance.

The three are Roger Baldwin, the principal organizer of the ACLU in 1919 and 1920, whom I met when he was 77 years of age and who guided me to a career at the ACLU; Sylvia Law, my former student and longtime partner in NYU's civil liberties program, who has sensitized me to many issues of individual liberty that I might have overlooked or undervalued; and John Sexton. It is a little awkward to include John in my short list, knowing that he would be presenting my award, but there is no way on the merits that I can exclude him, because of his remarkable success as dean and president at NYU and even more for the example he has shown me of how to enrich the lives of countless people one by one and day by day.

The three people I have named, although quite different in other respects, have a common characteristic. They all "travel hopefully," to use Roger Baldwin's phrase. They among others have taught me that more can be achieved when you convey optimism, cheer and energy. It makes it easier to overcome obstacles, to bring people together in

useful institutions, and to find ways for others to maximize their abilities. I have tried to do these things, and they all have given me great satisfaction.

I want to acknowledge one other factor that has brought me here today, one that is often underrated in probing the sources of success. . . . or failure. I refer to luck -- being in the right place at the right time, meeting someone by chance who will decisively affect your life, being the right person for a job that has just become available, and more along the same lines.

I am deeply conscious of my own good luck as I gratefully receive an award that means more to me than any other recognition I have received or could receive.

I thank the AALS and thank you all.