

Arizona justices honor Sandra Day O'Connor, women in law at ASU event

Panelists point to civic education as a way to restore public trust in democracy

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News
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Nearly 20 years ago, Arizona State University honored the legacy of Sandra Day O'Connor by renaming its law school in her honor, and her influence continues to be celebrated with a day dedicated to the late justice and public servant.

On Thursday, Sept. 25, the university marked Sandra Day O'Connor Day with an event titled "[Women of the Court: Leadership, Legacy, and Justice — A Conversation with Arizona's Women Supreme Court Justices.](#)"

"This is the only law school in the country named after a woman who served in all three branches of government," said [Angela Banks](#), vice dean of the [Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law](#), where the event was held. "We are gathered to reflect on her extraordinary influence on the nation and the law."

Hosted by ASU Law, the event was put on by the Arizona Civics Coalition, the Arizona Center for Civic Leadership at the Flinn Foundation and ASU's [Center for American Civics](#). It was sponsored by the Arizona Cardinals and the Museum of Democracy.

The program highlighted O'Connor's historic achievements and her enduring influence on civic education as a way to restore public trust in the judiciary and democracy as a whole.

Among those influenced by O'Connor are five of the highest ranking legal public servants in the state, who served as panelists: Arizona's Chief Justice Ann Scott Timmer, justices Kate H. King and Maria Elena Cruz, and retired chief justices Ruth McGregor and Rebecca White Berch. Timmer, McGregor and Birch all graduated from ASU Law.

“Justice O'Connor was fond of reminding us that we're not born understanding American democracy,” McGregor said. “This is something we have to learn about to understand. And the only way we do that is through civic education and civic engagement.”

O'Connor was the first female U.S. Supreme Court justice. She paved the way for many other women who went into the judicial system.

McGregor served as a law clerk to O'Connor during her first term on the U.S. Supreme Court and said she made a huge impact on her personal and professional life.

“She changed the trajectory of my life,” McGregor said. “And changed it for women in general.”

When McGregor started clerking with her in 1981, there was only one woman serving on a state supreme court in the country.

But she said that the next 15 years after O'Connor's appointment were in many ways the "golden opportunity" years for women as judges, as the number of female federal appellate judges tripled and the number of female state court judges more than tripled over that time.

“When she was appointed to the court, we all felt there was nothing we could not do,” McGregor said. “It was the first time anyone felt that.”

Gender bias and barriers

But things were not always easy for the trailblazer and those who followed her path.

After graduating at the top of her class from Stanford Law School in 1952, O'Connor was rejected by more than 40 law firms due to gender discrimination and initially had to take an unpaid position before proving herself enough to be paid a salary.

The justices recounted similar personal experiences with bias-based barriers. Cruz was told that college was not a worthwhile investment while Berch faced career assumptions that her role in a law firm was limited to making coffee and taking notes.

In the 1980s, Timmer said she worked alongside six male attorneys without any issues — except when they went to lunch at the Men's Grill at the Phoenix Country Club.

“I was not allowed in,” she said.

Despite persistent barriers, more and more women have pursued careers in law, often motivated by a desire to help others. That trend is evident at ASU Law, where women now make up a growing share of students. Last year, women made up more than 75% of the graduate students and 57% of JD students.

Roopali Desai, the U.S. Court of Appeals Ninth Circuit judge, who moderated the discussion, asked the justices what “top-secret advice” they had for handling one challenge common to career women: not being heard and watching others take credit for their ideas.

“When I started practicing law 51 years ago, it wasn't so surprising that men discounted what a woman would say ... but as time went on, it seemed that we should get past that,” McGregor said.

"But over the years ... I continue to see that happen. I don't think people do it deliberately. I think it's an ingrained behavior that they've practiced all their life, but I do think it has to be called out in the sense of identifying who actually had the idea first."

Timmer agreed that it is not done purposefully but still needs to be acknowledged. She said that she addresses situations like this by saying, "I understand your position, but how is what you said different from what I said five minutes ago?"

They also discussed how women in leadership roles have brought attention to issues that were often overlooked — such as domestic violence and the challenges faced by mothers in prison — and emphasized the importance of advocacy groups for victims.

The need for civic education

One pressing issue discussed was the declining public trust in the judiciary, and the need for civic education to restore confidence in the courts and democracy.

The judges noted that much of the skepticism stems from a limited understanding of the Constitution and state supreme courts.

"When we see the comments that are made and the criticisms that are made and the suggestions that are made by members of the public, and sometimes by members of the legislative and the executive branches of government, we see a real lack of understanding of how government works, of what role the Constitution plays, of how the separation of powers work, of how each branch of government has its own responsibilities and how they work together," McGregor said.

In response, the state supreme court justices have taken to writing press releases in an attempt to explain to the public what an opinion is all about and that it is not a policy decision but rather refers to statutes.

"We can't take for granted that people will always have trust in our judicial branch, and we need to protect and preserve it to be the valuable thing that is," Timmer said. "And if we don't, the rule of law is threatened; democracy itself is threatened."

All of which led to the importance of civic education — something O'Connor championed by founding [iCivics](#) and the Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy.

"I don't think anything surpasses civic education in correcting a lack of understanding about how the court works," King said. "We need to do everything we can to get people to understand the system because without that basic understanding, we can never come to an agreement as to the best way to further our American democracy."

"Civic engagement and civic education are everything to retaining and supporting our system of government. Without it, we simply can't go on existing as a democratic republic."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



From left: Retired chief justices Ruth McGregor and Rebecca White Berch, justices Kate H. King and Maria Elena Cruz, Chief Justice Ann Scott Timmer and moderator Roopali Desai, Ninth Circuit judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals, spoke on Thursday, Sept. 25, at an ASU Law event on the Downtown Phoenix campus marking Sandra Day O'Connor Day. Photo by Danielle Underwood/Arizona Center for Civic Leadership at the Flinn Foundation