

Keynote Address
by
Justice Lubbie Harper, Jr.
New Haven Legal Assistance
Celebration of Judges
New Haven, CT
November 2, 2011

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, friends and members of the New Haven Legal Assistance community. First, let me just say what a tremendous honor it is to be here tonight, to have the opportunity to make some brief remarks and to participate in this wonderful celebration of an outstanding group of judges. As a New Haven native, and as an admirer of the mission of New Haven Legal Assistance and the quality of its legal services, this evening's event for me really is a homecoming of sorts, as I had the distinct privilege of serving as president of the Board of Directors of the New Haven Legal Assistance Association for 12 years.

And as we all know, the mission of the New Haven Legal Assistance Association is to provide high-quality legal services to people in the greater New Haven area who are unable to obtain legal services because of limited income, age, disability, discrimination and other barriers. To that end, its number one goal is to ensure equal access to justice.

A necessary correlation to equal access to justice is the indispensable role judges play in dispensing justice. So tonight, we gather at this event – so aptly named “*Still Serving Justice: A Celebration of Our Alumni on the Bench*” – to honor judges who at one time or another served New Haven Legal Assistance before becoming judges. We gather this evening to recognize those individuals who have made justice a reality for the people this association serves. I don't have to tell you about the critical role judges play in our system of justice, and the 17 colleagues to be recognized this evening have distinguished themselves time and time again in upholding the basic principles that make our nation's judiciary the finest in the world.

Suffice it to say, this gifted group of individuals and the rest of you here tonight bring commitment, energy and an endless array of talents to the table. You obviously recognize the importance of treating those who lack significant financial means with the respect and dignity that should be accorded to all persons. Need I say that those characteristics are so vital in maintaining a system of justice that is fair and impartial; especially for those folks who view our justice system as an imposing and dehumanizing institution. Never before has there been such a great need for the services New Haven Legal Assistance offers for those folks – or for a bench committed to the shared goals of equal access to justice and equal justice under the law.

Recently released U.S. Census data shows that the rate of poverty in the United States rose from 14.3 percent in 2009 to 15.3 percent in 2010. Meanwhile, the unemployment rate remains at more than 9 percent, and more people collected public assistance in 2010 than in 2009.

With numbers such as those, I think it's fair to say that we all know what choice people make when they have to decide between feeding their children and hiring a lawyer. The American Bar Association reports that 80 percent of the civil legal needs of the poor are not being met. In addition, our courts and organizations such as yours – never awash in money in the first place – are struggling ever more against a tide of budgetary constraints. Fortunately, the bar and our courts are recognizing the necessity of encouraging pro bono work, and I am hopeful that more attorneys will step up to assist those in need.

Meanwhile, it is groups such as New Haven Legal Assistance that hold down the front line. You are to be commended for all the work that you do and for the immeasurable difference you make in people's lives. Similarly, to my colleagues honored tonight, rightfully, you are to be commended for your dedication to the principle of equal justice, and for the fair and impartial manner in which you have dispensed justice to those who have appeared before you; notwithstanding the color of their skin or whether they are poor or rich, Christian or Muslim, heterosexual or gay.

For that is really at the heart of why we're here. And why we're celebrating the good work of so many of New Haven Legal Assistance's alumni; people who still believe in the promise our forefathers made more than 200 years ago.

Retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, Jr. put it this way:

"Equal justice under law is not merely a caption on the façade of the Supreme Court building; it is perhaps the most inspiring ideal of our society. It is one of ends for which our entire legal system exists ... it is fundamental that that justice should be the same, in substance and availability, without regard to economic status."

Ladies and gentlemen, without judges who will ensure equal justice under the law, our efforts to maintain a system that is fair and impartial will fail. Make no mistake, the stakes are high if this should ever happen – it would shake the very foundation of our courts as we know them.

However, with judges such as those we honor tonight, I do not worry. They always have served justice, they are still serving justice, and they always will. We and the clients served by New Haven Legal Assistance are all better off because of their efforts. But most important, ladies and gentlemen, our democracy is the ultimate beneficiary. Yes, we are *"Still Serving Justice."*