

## Sandra Day O'Connor student forum

Over 1200 students from all over the Blue Valley area were given a once in a lifetime opportunity earlier today as they visited Yardley Hall to listen to former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor speak in a forum about her experience as the first woman to serve on the court, and about law and federalism in general.

Government teacher Ken Thomas said he wanted to accomplish two things with the presentation. The first item on his list was stressing the importance of civil education, and Thomas believes O'Connor did this well in her speech. The second objective was to emphasize how wonderful a story O'Connor has.

"Her story demonstrates that hard work and perseverance can overcome so many obstacles," Thomas said. "The fact that she graduated at the top of her class from Stanford University. She applied to 40 law firms, and they straight up turned her down and said they wouldn't hire her because they didn't hire women ... Here is a person who is so far ahead of her time, the criticism that was reaped upon her when she was nominated. She made a point of saying that you shouldn't not do something just because you're the first. She did a really great job of saying it's OK to be first. It was just a really powerful message that she gave."

According to principal Amy Murphy, while she knew a little about O'Connor's background, she was unable to connect how hard it must have been as a woman during that time to get a job until O'Connor mentioned it.

"I think it was a once in a lifetime experience for the kids," Murphy said. "To have an opportunity to hear, even just to hear a Justice of the Supreme Court speak, but to hear the first woman Supreme Court Justice, that's not something everybody gets to experience."

O'Connor was nominated by President Ronald Reagan after serving in multiple law firms both in the U.S. and overseas as well as being a member of the Arizona State Senate. According to O'Connor, while being the first female selected to preside in the court, there was an immense amount of pressure with the job. She worked hard to insure she was not the last female, O'Connor said.

"I learned that even though she's not technically a Supreme Court Justice anymore, because she's retired, she still has such a great influence," senior Krista Braun said. "She's in Washington D.C. all the time and still goes to the court house and watches different cases and still matters to those cases."

There was much preparation that went into bring O'Connor to Johnson County, Government teacher Ken Thomas said. When Thomas became a member of the Johnson County First Amendment Foundation two years ago, he said he knew there was an invitation out to the Justice for her to come and speak to the foundation in the form of a student forum. While O'Connor was unable to visit that year, Thomas received confirmation last year she would be visiting in the fall of 2013.

"It really doesn't sink in for awhile that she's going to come," Thomas said. "I'm sitting there thinking about all these things that we had to do and of course at the time I was busy with the curriculum for the We The People movie I was doing. November 12<sup>th</sup> seemed so far away. I just kind of went, OK, well I've got to do this so I'm going to do it and worry about that later. When we started communicating via email, it was like, 'Oh, this is really going to happen.' And obviously because of health issues and things like that, you never know what's going to come up. Once Labor Day hit, the realization came that this was going to be big."

The First Amendment Foundation started extending an invitation out to College Now AP History and AP Government teachers with the goal of filling the auditorium. However, Thomas said he in no way expected the reaction that awaited him. The Foundation had filled the auditorium halfway at the end of the first week, and in the end there would be over 1000 students as well as other members of the Johnson County community in attendance resulting in the biggest event the Justice had ever been too.

“As the time grew closer, the stress began to build as we were trying to get everything done on time,” Thomas said. “The sleepless nights start. You always have these irrational thoughts. The, ‘What if’s?’ My favorite irrational thought is, ‘Well, what if the speaker doesn’t show up?’ What do you do? You’ve got 1200 people in Yardley Hall and nobody shows? You just have to put those things aside and tell yourself everything will be fine. But it was stressful.”

Earlier last week, students were given the opportunity to submit questions they wanted to ask O’Connor during the presentation, and their teacher sent them in to be answered during the forum. According to Government teacher Ken Thomas, the presentation fell at the perfect time for his classes. His regular classes had just finished up a unit on the court and judicial system, and his AP classes were preparing to begin it.

After an initial introduction from Eugene Balloun regarding a court case that took place in KS dealing with the first amendment, O’Connor was introduced and escorted onto the stage. The following forty five minutes included a guided question answer forum by Georgetown law professor Meryl Chertoff and O’Connor. Apart from talking about her own life and experiences as well as law and federalism, O’Connor also stressed the importance of the younger generations learning civic duty. She explained her new program, iCivics, and how it is designed to educate students on their rights and responsibilities.

“I wanted to put that spot light on the Civics education part,” Thomas said. “Stress the importance of being involved and being educated and being a good citizen. The importance of civil rights and civil liberties in our society and those types of things. I think she did outstanding job talking about those things and telling us that people’s voices can be heard.”

While O’Connor was a wealth of information on general topics, Braun and Murphy noted how she steered away from controversial ideas and questions.

“It was a little bit impersonal because she’s not allowed to answer our questions from her own perspective since she is such a huge role model and such a huge component of the Supreme Court still today,” Braun said. “She’s not able to give her full opinion because it can be used later against her.”

“I thought it was interesting how she was a little guarded in her answers,” Murphy said. “She probably has to be because everything she says in on the record and gets recorded. I thought it was interesting for them to hear first hand what a Supreme Court Justice experiences. Even though you can go to D.C. and go through and tour the building, you don’t ever get to hear the first hand experience that goes on.”

At the conclusion of the presentation, Thomas stepped onto stage and presented a surprised O’Connor with a \$10,000 check for her program.

“I was nervous,” Thomas said. “I was OK as I was getting ready to walk out and I began to step onto stage and then she started talking again. And it was like ‘Uh oh. How long is she going to go?’ I was standing there, and I could feel my nervousness increase. I kind of felt exposed and figured people were looking at me weird. After I said my first sentence it was kind of like a sporting event for me, and everything went OK.”

"[Meeting her backstage] was awesome, it really was awesome," Thomas said. "Just her baring. She asked what time she was supposed to be on stage. And I didn't think she was talking to me. Obviously she was. Her response was very pointed, 'Answer my question.' And I immediately looked at her and got the feeling I was in front of the Supreme Court. And it was like she was up on the bench and she was asking me a question as I was giving my oral argument. And it was, 'Yes ma'am, nine thirty, ma'am.' It was a wow moment. It was wonderful to meet her. I got a glimpse right there as to what it would be like to stand there in front of these nine justices who basically have the same baring that she has. That drilling kind of, 'Let's get it done, let's go.' It was just awesome. It was one of those things I will never, ever, ever forget."

Backstage after the presentation, Balloun gave Thomas a \$1,000 check to be used for the We The People program. Thomas assures the money will be put to good use. Thomas also introduced Murphy and superintendent Tom Trigg to O'Connor after the program.

"I think being able to take Dr. Trigg and Dr. Murphy back to the back and have them get their photos taken, it was a great experience for them as well," Thomas said. "Almost immediately when I got back, Dr. Murphy came up to me and started talking to me about it. She was still excited. It was an awesome, awesome experience."

"It was awesome," Murphy said. "It was awesome. That will go down in my memory book. Favorite part of the day. I was surprised at how personable she was. Not only in the large group, but on the individual level. When she found that Dr. Trigg and I work with kids, she wanted to know what the kids are doing and what they need. That kind of thing. It was cool to see."

Murphy said she learned many things of interest from the program, and out of everything O'Connor talked about, Murphy took away the message of not giving up.

"If there is something out there that you want to do and you really enjoy, go out there and do it," Murphy said. "There is really nothing out of your reach, and when the going gets tough, you kind of have to keep pushing along. Just like she did."