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Supreme Court Law Day Remarks Secretary of the State Stephanie Thomas May 1, 2024

☞ Good morning.

☞ It's so great to be here...even though I spent my life trying NOT to end up in court!

☞ Thank you for having me here today to talk about one of my favorite subjects – voices of democracy. One of the questions I get the most these days is, "Is our democracy in real trouble." I have my concerns, but I remind those asking that in a democracy, it is the people who rule. So I ask what THEY are doing to be sure our democracy isn't in trouble.

☞ At that point, I often get a blank stare because many haven't stopped to think about their obligations. They haven't thought about what is required of THEM to protect and keep our democracy healthy.

☞ That's why I'm so happy to see this theme being celebrated and to see young people here today.

☞ I certainly wish I had understood all of this better earlier in my life. At your age, I never imagined any of this.

☞ At your age, I was doing the normal things like getting good grades, volunteering at the local hospital, and doing projects with my school's clubs. But I was also working to help my parents pay the rent, doing my homework by candlelight the months we didn't have electricity, and I had already seen too much injustice being poor and Black to think the system worked for people like me.

€ I saw my family members voting in every election and listened to them talk about how important it was to do. They remembered family members who weren't allowed to vote or had to jump through hoops to do so. I knew it was important; and I did vote in every election, but I didn't have a passion for it. I didn't see any impact.

€ I now realize how naive I was. And how wrong. I had seen impact my ENTIRE LIFE.

- Someone elected decided to stop the war in Vietnam which meant my father could finally return home when I was two years old. What might my life have looked like if he had never made it home or was deployed until I was much older?
- Someone elected decided to allow affordable housing in the downtown area where I grew up which allowed me to live in a walkable district. I had a bus on the corner and could walk to work, the library, the supermarket, and the train. We didn't have a car, so this was life changing. Without a car, I had to attend the college I could get to by using public transportation.
- Someone elected decided what fees I had to pay when I started my own business.
- Someone elected decided how much money I had to raise to even run for this office.
- On, and on, and on.

€ It wasn't until I was elected myself that I realized that almost every aspect of our lives is governed by decisions made by elected people and those tentacles are very long – those decisions can impact us AND the generations to come.

€ It wasn't until I was elected that I realized that voting is not our only obligation in a representative democracy. How can we be represented if we only speak up one day a year at the ballot box? Policy isn't written on Election Day; we need to weigh in the other 364 days of the year.

- € As I grew older, I came to realize that voting isn't enough. We unfortunately have been conditioned to think that once we cast our votes on election day, all of our problems are magically solved.
- € But we don't live in a fairytale. We can't sit around waiting for someone to rescue us. A democracy takes a lot of work, and it always has.
- € One of the reasons I ran for Secretary of the State is because I truly believe that the people CAN rule. Civic engagement is a powerful tool if we use it regularly. But first, it requires civic literacy.
- € Unfortunately, many people have equated civics with politics, and that has turned a lot of people off.
- € But, at its core, civics is really about caring about the things that are affecting our communities and wanting to do something about it.
 - It's about advocating for causes we believe in, and actively participating in the democratic process at every level.
 - It's about recognizing that democracy is not a one-way street, but a two-way dialogue between the government and the governed—a dialogue in which each of us has an important role to play.
- € How can we hope to move things forward and have an impact if we have no idea how the system works?
- € It doesn't matter what age you are, what you do for a living, or how much education you have. Our voices matter, and our actions have the potential to shape our communities. The history of our country is full of examples of all types of people who have brought about extraordinary change.
- € In fact, big changes – think about the civil rights movement, gay marriage, women's suffrage – these changes took many DECADES. People didn't just vote and then a law was passed.
- € It took MANY people doing MANY different things:

- Yes, some people ran for office, and people showed up to vote for them
 - But there were lawyers who wrote policy
 - People who picketed and rallied in the streets
 - Others who wrote articles and OpEds
 - Some who implemented changes in their businesses or organizations, even before laws were passed
 - And there were many more who changed hearts and minds just by talking to family, friends, and neighbors in the course of their day
- ≠ What if millions of people undertook these actions all the time? Could we foster change in ten years instead of 20? What about five? Or two?
- ≠ A healthy democracy is a team sport, and we each have to do our part. And just like any sport, it takes practice to get better at civic engagement. And just like being on any team, everyone has their good days and their off days. And you rely on each member of the team to do their part.
- ≠ It can be difficult to keep up with what's going on with your town council and at the state legislature when you're juggling school or work or a family...or all of the above.
- ≠ It can be frustrating to feel like nothing you do makes a difference.
- ≠ But, making time to learn how you can have an impact, and doing the work is a lot easier than living under bad policy.
- ≠ So, I ask all of you to use your civic power.
- Be active, engaged citizens who are not content to sit on the sidelines.
 - Remind others that civics isn't politics.

- Accept that our form of government isn't going to be the easy thing in our life, but like everything else – learning a new subject, work, relationships – you don't have to learn it all at once and can get better at it over time
- ✚ We the People are the power behind these United States... if we don't lose our way.
- ✚ You can make a difference and if you don't know where to start, visit our website at Civics101.ct.gov and check out our Power of Civics list. Thank you.