



CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION

EDUCATING TOMORROW'S CITIZENS

LOS ANGELES AREA HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS QUESTION SUPREME COURT JUSTICES

For immediate release
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U.S. Supreme Court Justices Stephen G. Breyer and Anthony Kennedy and former Justice Sandra Day O'Connor fielded questions in Washington Tuesday from 10 students from nine Los Angeles area high schools. (For full list, see below). They were joined by students from Pennsylvania area high schools. These conversations were taped and will be distributed in DVD format to more than 60,000 school and libraries nationwide before Constitution Day this fall.

The visit to the Supreme Court was organized by the Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands and the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania as part of their civics education initiative. The Constitutional Rights Foundation of Los Angeles, which is working with Annenberg on a teaching guide to accompany the 2006 DVD, selected the California students to participate in the taping.

After a long flight from Los Angeles, the 10 California students descended on an Italian meal of pasta and pizza with gusto on Monday night in Washington. Kathryn Kolbert, executive producer of NPR's "Justice Talking" and an organizer of the Constitution Day event, described to the students what to expect the following day and the origins of this program. It was clear from the conversation that this was a group ready to meet the justices and more than comfortable with the task ahead.

The next morning (Tuesday), the jeans and t-shirts had been exchanged for suits and dresses. The California delegation took front-row seats as the film crew put final touches on the sound and video equipment. Dora Duru, of the California Academy of Math and Sciences, slated to ask one of the opening questions, fingered the small index card and waited for her turn. "What are the most important ways in which judicial independence is protected by the Constitution?" she asked after the justices had taken their seats and the cameras began to roll. Justice Anthony Kennedy turned the question back to the students, asking them for their answers. "The law is a check on judges," he told them, after hearing several responses. "By oath, judges are committed not to do what they want but to do what they must."

Pia Won, of North Hollywood, who confessed to being "terrified" beforehand, rose and confidently asked if the Supreme Court justices play a different role than that played by judges in lower courts. Justice Breyer fielded that one. "We're patrolling the boundaries of the Constitution. Filling up the middle is the democratic process. We pay special attention to cases that test those boundaries."

Siodhbhra Parkin, Long Beach Polytechnic, who will head to Harvard University next year, asked which produces better judges – direct elections or merit selection panels.

Page Two
Press Release
May 17, 2006

Former Justice O'Connor replied that merit selection were preferable to direct partisan elections because direct elections require judges to raise campaign money, and that money typically came from lawyers. "Judges have a tremendous amount of power and authority and people want to keep some strings on them," added Justice Kennedy. He encouraged citizens, bar associations and judges to emphasize the need and value of an independent judiciary.

The conversation took place in the Court's ornate East Conference Room. From the opening question the students and justices discussed the significance of the judiciary and the ways that independence is protected by the Constitution.

At the conclusion of the 90-minute event, the justices stood and shook hands with the students, congratulating them on their questions and the depth of their understanding of the issues. After posing for photos on the steps of the Supreme Court, the Californians headed out for a tour of the Capitol.

The Constitutional Rights Foundation seeks to instill in our nation's youth a deeper understanding of citizenship in our Constitution and its Bill of Rights. CRF is dedicated to assuring our country's future by investing in our youth today. Constitution Day will be observed in schools this year from Sept. 11-22. Federal law requires all schools that receive federal funds and all federal agencies to offer educational programs on the Constitution. For more information about CRF programs and Constitution Day, please visit www.crf-usa.org.

List of Students Participating

Andrew Arons, Valencia High School
Pia Won, North Hollywood High School
Andrew Kao, Palos Verdes Peninsula High
Alice Lee, Glen A. Wilson High
Siodhbhra Parkin, Long Beach Polytechnic
Carlos Pena, Redondo Beach High School
Christina Tekie, Redondo Beach High School
Shashank Ravi, Diamond Bar High School
David Sforza, James Monroe, High School
Dora Duru, California Academy of Math and Science