



NPR's Nina Totenberg Gives Keynote Address at Stockton's Constitution Day Event

For Immediate Release; with Totenberg photo

Thursday, September 18, 2014

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Galloway Township, NJ- Nina Totenberg, award-winning legal affairs correspondent for National Public Radio, was the keynote speaker for The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey's annual celebration of Constitution Day on Sept. 17.

Totenberg's presentation, "The Supreme Court and You," shared behind-the-scenes stories about the Court and offered her seasoned and astute perspective on the institution's transformation over the years.

President Herman Saatkamp introduced Totenberg, emphasizing "the great need for reporters to give a fair, objective account of news today."

Totenberg praised Stockton's work to "celebrate the great, founding document we live by."

The NPR reporter began by humanizing the elusive United States Supreme Court Justices. She told tales of former Chief Justice William Rehnquist measuring snow to settle an inside bet between the justices; described Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg as a "savvy operator" when handling media inquiries; and explained why Justice Elena Kagan hunts with Justice Antonin Scalia (fulfillment of a promise Justice Kagan made to senators during confirmation proceedings.)

Totenberg reminisced about Justice Harry Blackmun's famed notes, which meticulously detail much of the high court's happenings during his tenure.

"There is no access to similar notes now," Totenberg segued. "I have been covering the Court longer than any of the United States Supreme Court Justices have been sitting on the Court... and the Court is always changing."

Totenberg discussed how covering the institution has changed since she began reporting in 1968, contrasting *Tinker v. Des Moines* in 1969 on public school students' constitutional rights,

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with the BONG HiTS 4 JESUS (Morse v. Frederick) case on suppressing free speech by students that promotes drug use in 2007, as well as Brown v. Board of Education and subsequent rulings.

“Most of the issues in the 1960s were related to civil rights, such as interracial marriage and school desegregation. The country has made progress in racial issues since I’ve been reporting. In 1968, even though women were covered under the 1964 Civil Rights Act, sex discrimination was as popular as apple pie. Some issues were never discussed– and the idea of gay rights didn’t exist,” Totenberg said.

The focus of civil rights has shifted over the years. In 2003, when Lawrence v. Texas (which struck down Texas’ sodomy law, making same-sex activity legal in every state) was decided, a courtroom full of gay former law clerks wept as Justice Anthony Kennedy read the opinion, Totenberg said. The evolution of civil rights has continued since then, as seen in recent hot-button rulings in cases such as Prop 8, the California measure preventing same-sex marriage and Defense of Marriage Act in 2013.

“It’s a rare twist, that not only are the losers appealing, but winners are also seeking decisions from the Supreme Court,” she said.

Today, the Court is “awash in technology cases,” which brings dramatic realization to the transformation of society, Totenberg explained. The Court has also become more predictable and polarized, reflecting the society we live in, she said.

“At NPR, we want the lay public to understand the institution and what it does. People know very little about the Court or how it works. The purpose is to educate and interest listeners,” Totenberg emphasized.

Prior to the Constitution Day presentation, Totenberg met with students from Associate Professor of Political Science Linda Wharton’s Constitutional Law and Advanced Constitutional Litigation classes, student members of Political Engagement Project and Coalition for Civic Engagement, Student Senate leaders, Office of Service-Learning staff, and members of the Stockton Public Relations Student Society of America.

She told students “what NPR does makes a difference” and that “an enormous number of people do want to know what’s going on in the world.”

“It is small, incremental work at times. I broke the Anita Hill story because it was a great story, and as a result, it opened up the discussion on sexual harassment. There are stories that do make a difference,” Totenberg said.

The event was sponsored by The Offices Academic Affairs, and Development and Alumni Affairs; Stockton’s Political Engagement Project; and the College Foundation. The William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy donated pocket-sized Constitutions which were handed out at the event.

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