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Justice O'Connor: Twenty Years of Shaping Constitutional Law

Introduction[†]

Justice Ruth McGregor^{*}

Introducing a person as well-known as Justice Sandra Day O'Connor is always difficult. Although much can be said about Justice O'Connor, my emphasis here is upon Justice O'Connor as a pioneer.

All of us have a general notion of what it means to be a pioneer. Upon consulting the dictionary, I discovered that the definitions of pioneer, whether the word is used as a noun or as a verb, could have been written with Justice O'Connor as a model.

A pioneer, in the most traditional sense of the word, is one of the first to settle a primitive territory. Justice O'Connor meets this definition. Her pioneer roots run deep, for her family came as early settlers to Arizona, where they established a traditional Arizona ranch. The deep seated love for Arizona and its land, harsh and demanding as it can be, that distinguishes true pioneers, marked and shaped Justice O'Connor and prepared her for the future challenges she would face.

A pioneer is also one who leads the way. I have heard her say that she will always be identified as "TFWOTSC—The First Woman on the Supreme Court." Her position as TFWOTSC, however, formed only a part of her pioneering work. She blazed trails not only in the judicial system, but also in the Arizona legislature and the roles she filled as a lawyer.

If one wishes to truly understand the impact of Justice O'Connor, equally important is the definition of a pioneer as one who prepares a way for others to follow. Justice O'Connor never entertained the thought that her work was done once she secured her own successes. Her importance as a pioneer always included her insistence that others be given a chance to follow her. Many have benefitted from her ability to encourage, cajole, and open doors.

[†] Excerpted in part from Justice McGregor's introduction of Justice O'Connor at an Arizona event honoring 100 women and minority attorneys.

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Finally, a pioneer is one who leads safely. Perhaps this is the most important role that Justice O'Connor has filled. Many women and minority lawyers felt concern that, by entering fields previously closed to us, we would be forced to give up traditional characteristics and values important to our identity. Justice O'Connor allayed those concerns. She showed us that a woman can rise to a level of great prominence and power without abandoning the best of the traditional roles of wife, mother, and friend. She showed us that one can exercise authority without losing the ability to show compassion, loyalty, and warmth. Most importantly, she showed us that going through a door does not require closing it to others.

The focus of this symposium is upon Justice O'Connor's role as a pioneer on the Supreme Court, far beyond being TFWOTSC. From equal protection to the religion clauses to reproductive rights, Justice O'Connor has blazed trails and left her mark upon the law.