Tools For Living: Leecia Eve Shares From Advice At the Students Of Color Dinner

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Tools for living

Leecia Eve shares some advice at the Students of Color Dinner

"These are words I have lived by... words that have carried me through."

Those principles of a sound career and a happy life were the substance of Leecia Roberta Eve's keynote address at the Students of Color Recognition Dinner, held April 16, 1999, at the University Inn & Conference Center.

A graduate of Smith College and Harvard Law School, Eve, 34, is a partner in the Buffalo law firm Hodgson, Russ, Andrews, Woods & Goodyear. As the daughter of New York State Assemblyman Arthur O. Eve, long active in Buffalo politics, she grew up knowing what a lawyer's life is like. Now, having served as a judicial law clerk for the New York State Court of Appeals and as an attorney with the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, as well as in positions at law firms in Boston, Washington and Buffalo, she has put those observations into practice — and spoke at the dinner about some truths she has discovered about lawyering and living well.

"The first thing to keep in mind," Eve said, quoting a former professor, "is, do well and do good. He meant, be the best you can possibly be, whatever you happen to do. Think of the exhilaration when you ran the fastest you ever ran, or danced the best you ever danced, or played the piano the best you ever had. The
practice of law can be like that.

"Yes, you will encounter racism, sexism, classism, elitism and about 20 other -isms. Those things can be devastating. But being the best you can be can help you to combat that."

Eve went on to say doing well also means being active in serving the community. "At the end of the day when I am on my deathbed," she said, "I am not going to be thinking I was a partner at Hodgson, Russ, or I had a house, or whatever. I am going to be thinking, how do I get to heaven? And that means doing good for people who might otherwise not have a lot of power." She spoke of a securities attorney she knows who moonlights pro bono on behalf of battered women: "That is what is going to get her into heaven."

Eve's second overarching principle: "Remember those who came before you, and remember those who follow you."

"When I am having a bad day," she said, "I think about what my parents and grandparents endured, those who endured the institution of slavery, and whatever I am going through, they went through a lot worse."

As for the generations to come, Eve had some suggestions: Be a mentor. Get involved with children's lives. Speak to a group when asked: 'Think about the times you went to hear a great speaker and they were so good and so exciting that it carried you through the next month or two. You can be that person for someone.'

She spoke of the value of staying connected to family, friends and classmates, telling a moving story about a case in which she was representing women prisoners in the District of Columbia who had filed a class-action lawsuit alleging abuse by guards. "It was an incredibly emotionally draining experience," Eve said. "The courage that I saw in my clients was just so incredible, but in many respects overwhelming." She conducted her first direct examination in a courtroom in that case — and her busy father cleared his schedule and flew to Washington to observe. She could hear him sobbing in the back of the courtroom, she said, and knew that it was because of his long-ago work in the tragic inmate uprising at Attica State Prison.

"No matter how long the day," Leecia Eve said, "I was always in contact with my family by phone at the end of the day. The support was incredible. It was like they were putting their arms around me through the phone."

Continuing contact with one's classmates, she added, can be good for the career as well as the soul. "The friendships that you have formed here will be critical in enabling you to do well," she said. For example, she said, preparing for an oral argument, she called a friend who had clerked for a judge and had seen thousands of arguments made — and gave Eve a list of the 10 worst things she could do and how to avoid making those mistakes.

"No matter what you have done in the past," Eve concluded, "let today be the first day of being the best you can be. I am a firm believer that everything in the world is there for the taking.

"And united we stand, divided we fall. It is great to see an event like this where we not only acknowledge diversity but celebrate it."

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