



Civics 101

BY TIM EIGO

On March 23, a scene played out in Phoenix that has occurred thousands of times, but never ceases to inspire.

Citizens-to-be, 50-strong, completed their long journey to taking their oath of allegiance to the Constitution and laws of the United States. For that morning, at least, the Phoenix Convention Center had in spirit if not fact reverted movingly to its former title—*Civic Center*.

When they calendared the event, the Arizona residents hailing from 26 countries had already spent many hours learning about their adopted nation. Expecting a routine if moving swearing-in ceremony, they got much more.

Their first pleasant shock was that hundreds of **middle-school students** from area Montessori schools were also there to welcome them and host a reception for attendees afterward.

Next, they were pleased to see that the oath would be administered by **Sandra Day O'Connor**. Longtime Supreme Court Associate Justice, Arizona native, raconteur—no one was better equipped to create and welcome new citizens.

O'Connor lent the occasion her own wry and straightforward delivery. Following the oath—which she whimsically compared to the longer form that judges must utter—she offered advice.

“Now that you are citizens,” she told the group, “you have to pay attention to our Constitution.” To illustrate her point, she held up the paperback version she carries with her always. Arizona’s “retired” justice then lectured briefly on that organic document.

“Our Constitution is very short, but what is unusual about it is the power it confers on all branches over the other branches.” When the European Union tried to draft a constitution that included all that everyone desired, she said, it weighed in at 450 pages—“bigger than a big fat telephone book for the City of New York.”

The understated jurist added, “Our Constitution has been a pretty

good framework, I think.”

Finally, O'Connor advanced her life's current chapter—a focus on civics education. She mentioned her role in **ourcourts.org**, a Web site that helps children and others take an active role in an important branch. On the site are games, learning materials and a constantly changing Q&A between students and O'Connor herself.

She spoke to all in the room when she concluded, “Actions such as yours are exactly how our nation was built, how our nation was formed, how our nation was shaped.”

Another surprise at the ceremony was **Gerda Weissmann Klein**, the founder of **Citizenship Counts**, a nonprofit group that advances civics education. She is a naturalized citizen herself, but also a Holocaust survivor and Academy Award-winner. She spoke movingly of her life's path, of how a person's spirit can be salvaged or shattered by simple human interactions. (Klein will be the featured speaker at the **Bar convention** in June, where members will undoubtedly find her insights poignant and relevant.) Klein and Citizenship Counts are piloting a curriculum in Arizona schools that aims to show—not just tell—the lessons of freedom to students.

For a few hours in March, the convention center had become a classroom. And all in the room, not just the 100 schoolchildren, were the students. **BT**

Change of Venue looks at unique legal happenings, trends or niche practices. It takes you off the legal highways onto the legal byways. To submit story ideas or stories, write to arizona.attorney@azbar.org