



Sam Attal / Special to the Daily Journal

Retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, left, and California Supreme Court Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye speak about civics education at an Association of Business Trial Lawyers event.

Legal leaders focus on civics

Former, current high court justices tout education as key to cutting down on crime

By John Roemer
Daily Journal Staff Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — As a junior cowgirl growing up on her demanding father's Arizona ranch, Sandra Day O'Connor had a flat tire while driving lunch in an old pickup to a roundup crew.

Fixing the tire made her two and a half hours late delivering the meal, the retired U.S. Supreme Court justice told a meeting of the Association of Business Trial Lawyers here Tuesday. Her father glared angrily; she apologized, she said.

"Well, you should have started earlier," O'Connor, 83, quoted his grumpy retort, leaving unsaid the status she would later gain as the first woman on the high court after 191 years of male exclusivity.

Co-starring at the event was California's chief justice, Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye, who disclosed that her brief post-law school stint as a blackjack dealer in a Reno, Nev., casino when she couldn't find work as a lawyer was helpful to her career.

"First, they taught us eight

hours a day how to count to 21," she joked about training for the post. "But then it got interesting. As the dealer at the table, you're anonymous. So I'd watch lawyers there talking about cases. You could read disappointment, joy, posturing. It gave me a great feel for picking a jury when I joined the district attorney's office."

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— Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye

Turning serious, both women stressed their conviction that civics education must be revived to amp up active citizenship, involve youth in government and cut crime.

O'Connor has established a website, iCivics.org, featuring

interactive video games that let players run for president, pass legislation and manage a firm specializing in constitutional law.

"Young people can learn how our government works," O'Connor said.

"Have you suggested that Congress might want to take a look?" asked Fern M. Smith, a former Northern District judge who moderated Tuesday's event.

"I hope Congress stays out of it," O'Connor said, to laughter from the audience.

For her part, Cantil-Sakauye, 54, devised a civic awareness group named Your Constitution: The Power of Democracy to help empower youth.

The justice said she was inspired by learning that 700,000 California students were suspended from school in 2011 for assorted disciplinary reasons. Many turn delinquent. "The [judicial] branch is the receptacle for failures in the schools," she said. "The link to civics education is how we keep kids engaged."

"This is a group of lawyers," Smith said of O'Connor and Cantil-Sakauye's audience. "What can they do?"

"They're big talkers," O'Connor said. "They can spread the word."

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