

Elena Kagan, In Her Own Words, May 11, 2010

ELENA KAGAN: President Obama called me last night and he said that I was going to be his nominee, and I didn't even know what to say. I was so overjoyed and overwhelmed, mostly. I'm not sure, actually, the joy has set in quite yet, but it's an extraordinary honor.

I grew up in New York City on the west side. I went to public school there. My mother was an elementary school teacher. My father was a lawyer. He was a community leader there trying to make the community better for the lives of the people who lived there. I went to law school at Harvard, and that was the place that I ultimately came back to and became Dean of Harvard.

You know, all through college, certainly I thought that law was a possibility. I thought, you know, law would be something that was both very, a very interesting thing to think about, but also that it mattered in the world.

I found two ways to make a difference. One is teaching, trying to instill my level of the law and my sense of why law matters in the world and how law can make a difference in the lives of ordinary people. And then public service has been an opportunity to take my legal skills and to take my legal training and work on some of the really important public policy issues of our time, and I did that both in the White House during the administration of President Clinton and in the Justice Department as Solicitor General in this administration. Nobody knows quite what that means. Some people think it's the people who put the labels on the cigarette packages, but, in fact, it's not. That's the surgeon general. The solicitor general is the person who represents the United States in the Supreme Court. We participate in about three quarters of the court's cases. Each time the court sets, I'll appear in court, and I'll argue. Now, usually the most importantly case to the court.

It is the most remarkable privilege to represent the United States in the Supreme Court and to advance the interests of the United States, the kind of long-term interests of the United States as a country, in the Supreme Court. And that's what I've tried to do as well as I was capable of, and I guess that's what I'm proudest of.

I was a clerk. So the last time I was in the Supreme Court as a clerk was many years ago. It was 1987 when I clerked for Justice Thurgood Marshall, one of my heroes, one of the great figures of American law.

[APPLAUSE]

I guess I hope that the American people over the course of this process will learn that I'm an open-minded person, that I'm a fair person, that I have good judgment, that I'll faithfully apply the law and do the best I can to decide it in the right way.

[APPLAUSE]

Through most of my professional life, I've had the simple joy of teaching, of trying to communicate to students why I so love the law, not just because it's challenging and endlessly interesting, although it certainly is that, but because law matters. Because it keeps us safe. Because it protects our most fundamental rights and freedoms. And because it is the foundation of our democracy.