

THE BENCH

The Official Journal of the California Judges Association

Winter 2005



*SPECIAL INTERVIEW WITH
JUSTICE SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR*



MY LIST: Cynthia Loo, Los Angeles Superior Court

Today I locked up a 15 year-old boy because he wasn't going to school, he continued to associate with gang members and use methamphetamine. My bailiff had to call for back-up.

For the third time this morning, the district attorney has moved from his seat, attempting to distance himself as far as he can in the small courtroom from the commotion. The boy's mother hasn't sent her child to school for six months, but promises she will now. She feels her son should get another chance. She stands up and shouts, "The probation officer hasn't done anything for me! The system is the problem! My boy ain't done nothing wrong!" The court reporter types furiously as I note "For the record the mother is being escorted out of the courtroom, using profanities..." We can hear the boy's mother yelling as she walks out of the courthouse. I requested that my bailiff escort me to my car so I could make a noon-time meeting downtown.

When I was hearing juvenile criminal cases in Compton seven months ago, I needed to keep a list on the bench as a reminder that good things do happen. It looked like I needed to start doing that again.

I went into my chambers and retrieved from my purse a program from the Montebello High School graduation dinner that was held a few months ago. The dinner was to honor probation youth who had done well at school. A few days before the dinner I was asked to speak at the dinner, to give a few "inspiring" words. I didn't really want to; I hate public speaking but I couldn't say "no."

Alex's last court appearance just happened to be the day before the graduation dinner. He had taken the bus to court alone because no one at the foster home could bring him in. Alex had a blue cardboard folder which held a high school diploma. Noticing it was from Marshall High School, I asked him whether he was going to be at the dinner and he said he heard that I was, and that he was going.

Despite my reluctance of speaking, I did go to the graduation dinner. When I arrived, the probation pointed out Alex to me and noted there was still room at his table. I walked over and Alex smiled and introduced me to the table. "This is my judge." He said.

I admit much of the time during the dinner portion of the evening I only half listened to what the judge and the probation officer seated next to me said. I was worried about the Channel 32 television camera set up by the podium. Alex was sitting across the table from me, looking uncomfortable too, but I attributed that to Alex being wedged in between two very talkative probation officers.

Alex's parents' parental rights had been terminated by another judge. But for a short period of time last year he lived with his biological mother. She had managed to sustain a brief period of sobriety, and was able to keep one of her kids. And because Alex was older I suppose social services felt that was sufficient reason to give him back to her.

The probation report submitted at Alex's June 27th court hearing however noted he was back in a foster home. I had no idea how that came about, and I didn't want to create an uncomfortable situation for Alex in court, so I didn't ask him. However, at the graduation

ceremony when Alex had stepped away, I asked his probation officer why Alex was back in foster care and not with his mom. The probation officer said the mother wouldn't send Alex to school, or take him to counseling. I thought, well the foster home isn't doing any better!

After dinner, the program started. The high school principal, the local chief of police and the superintendent of the school district took turns congratulating the honorees, commending the parents for being there to support and encourage their kids, Alex was the only student who didn't have a parent present.

The young people being honored were given an opportunity to say something. Most were too embarrassed to say much, and could only manage a mumbled thank you to their parents. But that's not what Alex did. With a white knuckled grip on his index cards, he slowly read his speech which obviously he spent much time preparing. His voice was a little shaky, but his words were very heartfelt as he described never believing himself that he would ever be able to graduate high school. When he was through, the probation officer took a long deep breath, as if to compose herself. We heard the loudest applause of the night.

I was glad I didn't miss the evening. Before I left I told him how much I enjoyed his speech. He politely thanked me for coming. With all his classmates milling around, I didn't think he'd want me to hug him, so I gave him a congratulatory pat on the arm.

I marked a little star by Alex's name on the dinner program. I placed the dinner program on the bench, right above the 2005 calendar and a list of court holidays - for further reference, a reminder - my new list that sometimes good things happen.

Cynthia Loo is a judicial officer with the Los Angeles County Superior Court and the recipient of the Los Angeles County Juvenile Court Bar Association's 2004 Juvenile Court Judge of the Year Award "as a result of the vote of [JCBA's] members in recognition of distinguished professional contribution to the practice of California Juvenile law..."



Many cow county courthouses survive from gold rush days. This one in Weaverville, constructed in 1857, first housed The Apollo Saloon, the county's first piano, and a business of ill-repute.