

# NEWS *of the school*

## N.Y. DRUG PROSECUTOR BRIDGET BRENNAN '83 RETURNS AS CONVOCATION SPEAKER



Bridget G. Brennan, '83

**L**AW SCHOOL alumna Bridget G. Brennan, Special Narcotics Prosecutor for the City of New York, was the keynote speaker on August 29, 2001 at the Law School's opening Convocation. Ms. Brennan, a 1983 graduate of the School, welcomed the incoming first-year law students with an account of her career journey from Wisconsin to the streets of New York. (Excerpts are printed beginning page 36.)

Ms. Brennan heads the Office of Special Narcotics which, with citywide jurisdiction, is the primary narcotics prosecution agency in the city. The Office annually handles an average of 6,000 indictments resulting from felony drug arrests, and conducts long-term investigations into major drug trafficking organizations. Ms. Brennan manages the administration of the agency's \$12 million annual budget and the supervision of a staff of approximately 90 assistant district attorneys and more than

100 support personnel.

A native of Milwaukee, Ms. Brennan earned a B.A. in Journalism from UW-Madison and was a television reporter in Eau Claire and Green Bay before entering law school. She had intended to return to journalism, but was offered a job as an assistant district attorney by Manhattan District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau after her law school graduation, on her first visit to New York City.

When her selection as New York's head narcotics prosecutor was announced, Ms. Brennan had been Acting Special Prosecutor for six months. "We picked her on her ability," District Attorney Morgenthau stated in the May 1, 1998 *New York Times*. "She's a very able lawyer." In the same article ("City's Acting Drug Prosecutor to Take Over Top Post Today," by Christopher S. Wren), Brooklyn District Attorney Charles J. Hynes cited Ms. Brennan's "extensive experience in prosecuting drug

felonies.” He added, “She’s also in sync with the issue that is important to me, which is treatment as an alternative to prison.” Ms. Brennan was also featured on a full-page cover article of the Weekend Section of the New York *Daily News* on May 9, 1998, in an article giving a vivid portrayal of Ms. Brennan and her assistants intercepting a phone call from Colombia and acting quickly to prevent a drug-related murder.

Following are two excerpts from Ms. Brennan’s remarks to the newly arrived Class of 2004:

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**I** CONSIDER MYSELF very lucky. I ended up in a career path consistent with who I am and what I wanted out of life. And my experience in this law school had a lot to do with that.

As I mentioned earlier, I was a reporter—both before and during law school. In my first year, I was the weekend news anchor at WTSO and WZEE. By my third year, I worked at WHA, the public radio station, where my stories ran so early in the morning that in order to hear them, I had to set my radio alarm to make sure I woke up in time.

Many nights, WHA was my home until two in the morning. Then I had to rush home, finish my readings, get some sleep and race to make it in time for Frank Tuerkheimer’s 8:50 Advanced Criminal Procedures Class. A word of caution—you don’t want to stroll in late to one of Tuerkheimer’s classes.

My grades were not stellar; I like to think it was because my attention was divided. But in my heart, I know it is because I did not then nor do I now have a passion for the law as an academic subject.

In “*One L*,” an account of his first year at Harvard Law School, Scott Turow writes about his immersion in lawbooks. “Studying ... I often feel ... as if I’m borne aloft, high just on the power of enlarging knowledge, making connections, grabbing hold.”

I *never* felt that way about law school. I was a fair student and managed to hit the Dean’s List a couple of times, but only after going through periods of panic and gripping insecurity. I did not want the big firm job or a spot on the Law Review—but I did want to be asked.

I have spoken at many law schools in the past three years. Believe me when I tell you, this is one of the enlightened ones. Here, the transformation

of student into lawyer does not come at the cost of a valued sense of self.

This school will provide you with a breadth of wisdom, knowledge and experience, it will teach you a method of analysis, help you set standards of excellence and ethics, and help you define what you should expect of yourself.

But, even the most self-confident of you will feel the relentless pressure to perform, anxiety about measuring up, a sense of despair when you are *not* the shining star, when you don’t make the Dean’s List or Law Review. Just remember grades are only an assessment of your performance on an exam: they don’t measure you as a person or even your future ability as a lawyer.

I like to think that I had some success in criminal law. As a prosecutor, I have spent eighteen years practicing criminal law. Yet my lowest grade *was* in criminal law. My highest—in Trusts and Estates and Tax. Go figure.

Even how I became a prosecutor was fortuitous. Impressed with a closing argument I had given in his class, Professor Tuerkheimer asked if I had considered applying at the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office under Robert Morgenthau.

At that point in my life, I had never even visited New York City. Nor had a desire. To me, New York was a distant block of concrete, with few opportunities for biking, playing tennis or sheepshead—a few of the things I loved.

I grew up in Milwaukee—one of eleven children—and my entire family was at that time still in Wisconsin. I got my undergraduate degree in Madison and thus far, the only places my reporting career had taken me were Green Bay, Eau Claire and Milwaukee.

But it was March of my third year and I didn’t have a job, so one week later, I landed at La Guardia Airport. I had arranged to stay with a friend who lived in Manhattan. I had no way of knowing then that the neighborhood was a major cocaine distribution center. Nor that one day I would be targeting narcotics traffickers in the area distributing drugs throughout the country.

The following day, I took my first ride on a New York City subway—*not* clean, *not* comfortable and certainly not well marked as I got lost. I underwent the first day of a series of interviews. Three days later,



Robert Morgenthau offered me a job in his office.

I had not entertained the possibility that this might happen. Since this was my first law job interview, it never occurred to me to ask for time to think the offer over. I figured you had to say yes or no. So—I said yes.

By the following September, I was one of sixty new Assistant District Attorneys in the Manhattan District Attorney's office. We came from law schools all over the country. I had envisioned my role as a prosecutor: using justice to make criminals pay, vindicating victims of assaults, homicides, sex attacks—the kind of thing you see on *Law and Order*. Instead, my first trial involved a defendant accused of riding the subway without paying his fare ...

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**I**N THOSE EARLY DAYS of my career, I never expected to become involved in narcotics prosecutions. Growing up in Milwaukee beer was king—but marijuana was the drug of choice among many of my peers. My own experience with narcotics was non-existent. So, I certainly never thought I would one day be tracing cocaine traffickers back to source countries or prosecuting drug kingpins.

Yet in the early 90's, I was recruited by the then Special Narcotics Prosecutor to lead a unit devoted to high-level narcotics investigations.

I jumped at the chance. As a trial assistant, I had come to realize the correlation between drugs and the growing incidence of violent crimes like homicides, robberies, assaults, crimes that had made New York a horrible place to live. I was tired of dealing with the back end of this issue, and this was my opportunity to do something about it.

Today, as Special Narcotics Prosecutor, I head an office of about ninety attorneys and a hundred other staff. We prosecute big-time smugglers who bring heroin, cocaine and marijuana from all over the world into New York City; computer techies who sell designer drugs over the Internet; and local drug gang members terrorizing entire neighborhoods.

In my ten years of doing this work, we have achieved success beyond anyone's expectations. Entire neighborhoods previously ruled by drug dealers have been returned to law-abiding residents. Yet, much work still remains in some areas including the neighborhood where I first stayed.

Because I was a prosecutor during the time when violent crime was rampant in New York, I tend to see the city as a crime scene and measure our progress by the scope of criminal activity. The landscape is rosier today than it has been in fifty years. People who for years lived in fear, always careful when venturing out of their apartments, are now boldly reclaiming their blocks. My own sense of satisfaction at having been involved in the change is indescribable.



**Bridget G. Brennan, Class of 1983, Special Narcotics Prosecutor for the City of New York, with her former professor of Evidence, Frank Tuerkheimer, who introduced her to the Class of 2004 before she gave the Convocation keynote speech.**

In contrast, earlier this summer, I passed through a section of Milwaukee where I used to ride my bike thirty years ago. I was horrified to see the kind of devastation I used to see in New York. I hope that some of you will choose careers in public service and that your work will eventually help clean up my hometown.

I am enjoying myself tremendously. I have an exciting career that allows me to contribute to making the world a better place. That is important to me—and I expect it is important to you.

So let me leave you with this thought: Phillip Marlowe, one of the greatest fictional detectives once said, "The law itself isn't justice. It's a very imperfect mechanism. If you press exactly the right buttons and are also lucky, justice may show up with the answer. A mechanism is all the law was ever intended to be."

As lawyers we are the only ones empowered to operate that mechanism.

I cannot think of anything more satisfying.

Thank you—and good luck. ♦