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# Justice O'Connor goes back to school

By Kristen A. Graham

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She was just a trim white-haired lady in a black-and-white checked jacket and black button earrings, but she nearly took Shardé Miller's breath away.

> "She's my dream," Miller, a junior at Constitution High, said of retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

> O'Connor spent the first part of her day in a Philadelphia courtroom, helping to clear a backlog on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. She wore a black robe and asked some questions.

> Later, she traveled to Constitution High School - a Center City magnet school emphasizing history and civics - for a ceremony christening a new mock-trial courtroom in her name.

> O'Connor also jumped at the chance to preside over a mock-trial presentation by students, said her friend Judge Marjorie O. Rendell of the Third Circuit, who sat on the new cherrywood judge's bench with O'Connor.

> Smiling, laughing, speaking warmly to students, O'Connor was a real presence. She was impressed, too, she said, praising the school as "a beacon of hope in civic education."

> O'Connor wrote on a clipboard as students spoke, and then she gave them real-world advice: Don't use notes. Hand gestures are good for emphasis.

> "I thought that a couple of you were talking to the judge rather than the jury," O'Connor said. "Never take your eyes off the jury."

> Most of all, O'Connor told Miller and the others, good attorneys appear to believe their own arguments. Miller, she said approvingly, "seemed pretty convinced of her case. I thought you all

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arguments. Miller, she said approvingly, "seemed pretty convinced of her case. I thought you all did a good job, and it was really fun to hear you."

> O'Connor, who has focused on civic education since retiring from the Supreme Court, told the students and others gathered to mark the room's dedication that she worried that the majority of Americans could name at least one *American Idol* judge but couldn't identify the Supreme Court's chief justice.

> The emphasis on high-stakes testing in math and reading that followed the federal No Child Left Behind legislation has made other important subjects suffer, she said.

> "Civic education is in a crisis in this nation," she said. "Most students think it's very boring and irrelevant."

> O'Connor hopes to help fix that with a project she has been working on, a Web site ([www.ourcourts.org](http://www.ourcourts.org)) that will provide students with a free, interactive civics curriculum. It launches later this year, and she asked the Constitution High students to test it out.

> "I hope to get a report back from you, Mr. Principal," O'Connor told Tom Davidson, who gave the justice a yes-ma'am nod.

> Miller was way, way impressed with the real-live O'Connor.

> "My dream is to become a Supreme Court justice," Miller said. "The fact that I was actually in front of her, presenting, was amazing."

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