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Stockton University students get civics lesson from Justice Neil Gorsuch

By [Joe Hernandez](#) · January 24, 2018



 Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch speaks Tuesday at Stockton University in Galloway, New Jersey. (Susan Allen/ Stockton University)

The most junior justice on the U.S. Supreme Court explained his judicial philosophy and recounted some of the lighter moments of his new job during an appearance in South Jersey on Tuesday.

Neil Gorsuch explained to the crowd at Stockton University — made up of students, university trustees, and other invited guests — the importance of understanding how government works and being able to discuss your opinion with people who disagree.

“To preserve our civil liberties,” Gorsuch said, “we have to work on being civil with one another.”

In January, President Donald Trump nominated Gorsuch to fill the seat left empty by Justice Antonin Scalia, who had died a year earlier. Gorsuch was confirmed in April.

On Tuesday, the Harvard Law School and Oxford University graduate stressed the importance of learning civics, citing a poll that showed only a quarter of Americans could name all three branches of government. In what felt partly like a commencement speech, Gorsuch encouraged the college students in the audience to “read, read, read, read, read” and “write as much as you can,” and peppered his remarks with quotes from the Constitution as well as Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton.

He also laid out the general ideas behind his conservative-leaning judicial philosophy, noting that judges should “apply the law as it is — not as they wish it were.”

“I think putting a man in prison on the basis of what’s in a judge’s heart is wrong,” Gorsuch said. “I think it’s fair to put him in prison based on the words on a page.”

Trump came up once during the event, and only in passing. But Gorsuch did stress that he feels completely independent as a judge on the country’s highest court: “I have no problem ruling against the government,” he said. “None of my colleagues does.”

The event was sponsored by the university’s William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy. Hughes’ son, Bill Hughes Jr., moderated a question-and-answer session, asking Gorsuch questions that had been screened in advance.

Hughes invited Gorsuch to speak at Stockton; the two men were roommates at prep school in Maryland and have remained friends ever since.

“Those ‘oh, golly’ expressions and Mr. Rogers sweaters,” Hughes Jr. said of Gorsuch, “well, he’s really like that. All the time.”

Gorsuch described his new role as Supreme Court justice as a “weighty and serious job,” saying that it is a “quiet” life, consisting largely of reading reams of legal briefs.

But not all of his time is spent on weighty issues of law: Gorsuch, as the newest judge on the bench, also acts as the justices’ representative to the cafeteria committee.

“On my very first day, the major issue of the day was the meatball subs,” Gorsuch said. “The marinara sauce had been somehow replaced by shrimp cocktail sauce.”

But Gorsuch’s biggest applause line of the hour-plus program had nothing to do with his legal accomplishments or judicial opinions.

The Coloradoan was talking about his childhood hero, Byron White, an NFL halfback and associate justice of the U.S Supreme Court. (White, also from Colorado, died in 2002.)

In describing White, Gorsuch said he was “like George Washington and John Elway wrapped into one,” referencing the former Denver Broncos quarterback.

“You’re in Eagles country now,” Hughes Jr. warned.

“At least it’s not Patriots country,” Gorsuch replied.

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