

SLIDE 1

Welcome to this presentation of Island Girl: Justice Florence Kerins Murray

I would like to thank both Ann and Vince Arnold for inviting me to speak tonight. I would also like to thank those of you from Newport, to whom I am indebted to my teachers. At Thompson that would be C. Sullivan, Ann Sullivan, Marie Commette, Winifred Lyons; Jim Martland, Arthur Dring and Syd Williams. At St. Catherine Academy, Sisters of St. Joseph, Loretto Joseph, Sister William Margaret, Sister Alfred Terese, and Father Peter McGuire. At Salve Regina University that would be Bob McKenna, Ann Nelson, Brother Eugene, Dan Cowdin, Michael Budd, and John Quinn. To all these teachers I owe my presence here today.

I. Introduction-my goals

- A. Justice Murray reached the pinnacle of success in the field of law. She was a judge in Rhode Island for over 40 years, but she came from humble beginnings in the Irish Catholic Fifth Ward of Newport.
- B. One of the keys to Justice Murray's achievement can be explained in terms of her family support, her father John Xavier Kerins, her mother Florence MacDonald Kerins, and her husband Paul F. Murray. She would also credit the encouragement and advice of Rhode Island political and judicial leaders along her life's path.
- C. To the very core of her being, Justice Murray's lifelong belief was that you needed education...drive...and opportunity. Those three cornerstones were the foundation for her rise to prominence and her ability to affect life in Newport and Rhode Island.

SLIDE 2 LIST OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS OVER A LIFETIME

She was a:

- respected military leader
- Newport community elected official
- state senator representing Newport
- educator of youth and lawyers
- national leader of judicial prominence,
- pioneer for women in Rhode Island

II. Film Clip

For those of you who knew Justice Murray and those who did not during her life time, which spanned nearly 90 years, I would like to show you a four minute film clip of an interview done by the Museum of Newport Irish History in 2001. The question asked...is not as important...as the answer given...in that here you can view Vintage Florence Murray:

- erudite and measured words
- critical... without sarcasm and
- an answer conveyed with a twinkle in her eyes and a smile on her face

Show first 4 minutes.

Of course, those of you who met Justice Murray... well know that she could have a frown... or look down at you crossly, if she sensed you demeaning her person...family... or values.

III. Why do I use the term Island Girl as a title to my presentation?

SLIDE 3 2 KAY STREET FLORENCE MURRAY HOME FOR FIVE DECADES

Although I knew of and had seen pictures of the judge in Newport papers, I did not meet her until the 8th of August 1999 at her home, 2 Kay Street, Newport. I had just entered the Salve Regina University Ph.D. program in Humanities. I had an idea for a dissertation topic that involved her life. Through my mother, Genevieve McGlinchey Mathison, I met the judge. Some of you may remember my mother, who for 10 years was on the Newport School Committee and who waged the campaign with Friends of the Waterfront for the Rights of Way to the Newport waterfront for all.

I entered a world of amazing stories in which Judge Murray shared her understanding of Newport lives, beginning with her youth in the 1920s. My interviews with the judge stretched into six years, the last being the 17th of January 2004 only two months before her passing. It was during the first year of interviews that she said that she would like me to write her biography and title the work *Island Girl*, because of her love for where she was born and lived all her life.

IV. What was her Irish connection in Newport?

SLIDE 4 LISDOONVARNA

A. Her grandfather John Kerins came to Newport in 1880 from Lisdoonvarna, County Clare.

According to the records of St. Mary's parish, John Kerins married Catherine L. Clune on 21 February 1887. And as an historian I might not have known this because the marriage was not recorded in City Hall records. However, with great thanks to our resident historian of all things Irish, namely Pat Murphy, we have the record from St. Mary's Church.

Justice Murray told me that the family lived upstairs from a saloon near Wellington on Thames Street. Sure enough, the *Federal Census of 1900*, shows that John Kerins lived at 565 Thames Street with his wife and children. There were four buildings next to the Newport Gas Light Gasometer near the Ancient Order of Hibernians property.

SLIDE 5 FEDERAL CENSUS OF 1900

The first son, John Xavier Kerins, who was Justice Murray's father, was the first in the family to be born in Newport and that was on 11 June 1888 in the rooms they rented above the saloon.

Joining the family in quick succession were William (1889), Raymond (1901), Lillian (1895) and Pauline (1898), all five children were born in

10 years before Catherine Kerins was 31! It was good that Irish immigrant John Kerins had a job as a teamster.

Justice Murray's grandparents struggled to work hard for the American Dream just as other immigrants who came to Newport at the end of the nineteenth century.

B. What about Judge Murray's father and his family?

The 1906 the *Newport Street Directory*, shows John X. Kerins was working as a clerk at the Torpedo Station, where he would continue in various positions for 44 years not retiring until 1948.

In the 1913 *Newport Street Directory*, John X. Kerins and Jeremiah S. Sullivan had a business on 22 Cannon Street called Kerins and Sullivan, Teachers of Stenography and Typewriting. Cannon Street was next to the US Post Office and extended from Spring to Thames before Newport Redevelopment in the 1960s.

Justice Murray said of her father, "He believed if you wanted something, you had to go and get qualified. So he went to Boston and passed the Civil Service Exam. Then he and Sullivan formed the business because as clerks at the Torpedo Station they had learned skills they could teach to others."

As with other immigrant families the Kerins brothers, sisters and parents very often boarded together as recorded in the *US Census for 1910*. Five Kerins siblings lived at the lower end of Pope Street, # 9 Pope St, abutting Thames Street: Esther and Pauline who were clerks; John X. and Raymond, who were working at the Torpedo Station, William, was listed as USN. They were all living at 9 Pope Street. The home built in 1880 still exists today with four bedrooms and 1250 sq. ft.

Five other Kerins family members live at the top of the street, 85 Pope Street. This home built in 1900 still exists with four bedrooms and 2000 square feet. One was her Uncle Michael F. Kerins, a gardener. His kids, Agnes, Mary and Martin were clerks and Thomas was working at the Torpedo Station.

Another uncle of Florence Murray, Thomas F. Kerins was listed in the street directory in 1901 as an expressman, managing and ensuring deliveries. By 1911 he owned a hack stable, rentals by the day and hour, located on Chapel Street. He was 58 years old and married to Elizabeth H. age 56 and they live at 3 Center Street. (*1910 Federal Census*)

In the *1917 Newport Street Directory*, Judge Murray's father John (1888-1958) has moved to Webster Court off Webster Street. Why? Because he had married in 30 June 1914 in New York City to Florence

Liston MacDonald (1890-1981) [of 438 West 116th Avenue in Morningside Heights near Columbia University.] They had met when she was in Newport at the Elks working for a Fifth Avenue store, modeling bridal hats and bridal outfits for the millionaire set.

Justice Murray told me that a midwife delivered her on the 21st of October 1916 in the house on Webster Court and that they lived among a solid Irish community. On the *1921 Atlas of Newport* (published by Sanborn Map Co) you can see neighbor's names listed on nearby houses: D Doherty, AH Tilley, JP Sullivan, JM Meikel, JF Casey and M Shea. Many of these Irish neighbors would be supporters for each of her later endeavors.

Although both John and Florence came from large families (he from 5 and she from 8 children) they had but one daughter, Florence. Justice Murray said, "her parents gave her every advantage in life and made her aware that a person who had advantages should reach out and help others."

SLIDE 6 18 NARRAGANSETT AND CAREY ELEMENTARY

As a child Judge Murray moved with her mother and father to a three-bedroom house of their own at 18 Narragansett Avenue, where she lived

until she went to Syracuse University. This home also still stands close to Carey School.

Although her father would continue at his clerk's job at the Torpedo Station, he had a business on Commercial Wharf, Polisheen Mfg. (Polisheen is a coating for increasing the durability of floors.) She recalled learning about real estate and landlord issues as her father purchased apartments. He also dabbled in real estate eventually developing a piece of property adjacent to Morton Park- Florence and Kerins Streets are the two streets that cut through the area.

As she grew up in the Newport area, what were some of the Notable events and people in the life of Murray?

As a 7-year-old she asked to use the monetary gift from her First Holy Communion for her first airplane ride of 15 minutes. She had many boy cousins in the Fifth Ward and played with them; she even rode ponies. She attended **Carey Elementary, a large stone building of 1896, with modern curriculum.**

SLIDE 7 ROGERS HIGH AND FLO KERINS GRADUATION

PHOTO

She was a local girl who went to the local public high school. Every day to school from her home on Narragansett Avenue, she walked to Rogers which was in the Townsend Building on Broadway next to City Hall.

Rogers was a large school of 1500 students with great teachers like Joe Nevins (later Dean), Ruth Franklin, Lloyd Robson (later historian), Frank Underwood (later Principal), and Mike Walsh (later Commissioner of Education).

Vignettes:

One speaker was sponsored by Elsie French Vanderbilt, an activist volunteer during World War I in France, and the mother of Rhode Island Governor William H. Vanderbilt. Mrs. Vanderbilt brought an English suffragette (who promoted equal rights for women) to speak in Newport. Murray recalls, “I remember the speaker telling us: you cannot be diverted. If you lose today, pick up the pieces, and follow the cause.” This was a motto Justice Murray used more than once in her life.

One of her best memories was swimming during the summers at Hazard’s Beach with friends and cousins. One summer she even worked at Easton’s Beach handing out sterilized swimsuits. Dean Lewis ran a nearby concession cart.

Choosing a College became a conflict within her home circle. A women's college like Pembroke close to home was her mom's vote. Her dad supported a coed university in a bigger setting but not NYC. **Syracuse** had a great school for journalism and public service, the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

SLIDE 8 SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY Alpha Chi Omega sorority house

When she was admitted and accepted her parents put her on a train by herself to journey in 1934. (Her parents owned a car by the time of her graduation in 1938.) The university in upper NY state was a campus of 4000 students in a city of 210,000. She wore pants for the first time because of the heavy snows- 100 inches each winter. She was an activist getting things changed, running for class office, homecoming, sorority, and writing for the *Daily Orange* newspaper and *Syracusan* magazine. Her professors were outstanding, and her experiences broadened her understanding of the world.

When she graduated, she thought about graduate school in educational administration but decided to work as a teacher on an island in the middle of Narragansett Bay.

SLIDE 9 PRUDENCE ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE AND BOAT

Prudence Island- Her first paying job was at a one room School house run by Portsmouth Public Schools. She earned \$900 and \$39 to start the fire every morning in the stove that heated the room. She was there for the Hurricane of September 1938 and watched a wave come up and take out the dock and knock down the General Store. Several of the children in her classroom died at one end of the island hit by 17-foot waves during the storm at their homes.

Murray knew after this year long experience that she wanted more out of life and she applied for law school. Again a discussion ensued of where. Again as with college she did the research. She noted that Boston University had a long history of admitting women that went back to the nineteenth century. She also noted that alumni of the law school were often selected for judgeships. She had already decided that she would be a judge one day.

VI. Venturing beyond the Island and return visits to Newport

SLIDE 10 FLORENCE KERINS AND PAUL MURRAY AT BU

Boston University Law School provided Murray with a chance to compete with men, deal with male attitudes, and hone her skills at argument and knowledge of the law. She also met her true love, one of the top students in

the class and writer on the Law Review, a young Irishman from Maine, Paul F. Murray.

Vignette: During the three years of law school she spent summers clerking for Ed Corcoran in his law office in Newport.

She was the only woman to graduate in the class of 1942 She took and passed her written and oral bar exams in Massachusetts, one of 133 who passed out of 354 who took the exam- only 24 women.

So what does Florence Kerins do- Get married? No. Open a law practice? No.

She joins the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps!!

SLIDE 11 LT.COL FLORENCE KERINS MURRAY

Why army? War had begun and the govt was looking for 1000 women to develop in administrative leadership. She served the war effort in Des Moines, Daytona Beach, Washington, D.C. and Baltimore with a couple of training camp commands after war's end in the summers of 1947 and 1948. She learned how to work with males as her superior officers and how to direct 20,000 women with fairness as Director of the Third Service Command, earning her the silver oak leaves of Lt. Col. the youngest in the WAC in January 1945.

SLIDE 12 FLORENCE KERINS IN HER WEDDING DRESS

Marriage at St. Mary's Church, Newport

Vignette: During wartime you had to receive permission from General George C. Marshall to wear a white wedding gown instead of your uniform. She did and married her sweetheart and soul mate on her birthday 21st of October 1943.

VII. Return to live and work in the Newport community

SLIDE 13 ENTERS LAW PRACTICE IN RI

In 1947, **Murray took the RI bar** and passed. She was only the fifth woman in RI history to pass the bar exam.

- Opened her own practice
- Was admitted to practice before U.S. Supreme Court, U.S. Tax Court, and U.S. District Court
- Became the RI Delegate to National Association of Women Lawyers Meetings
- She **opened her own practice** at 235 Thames Street, Newport, on the second floor over Eddy's market. Mr. Arthur Eddy told Murray, "I wish you luck, young lady, but I've never been to a lawyer in all my years in business." Murray recalls, however, that Eddy gave her a few

bills to collect to get started. On 15 October 1947, she proudly passed out her card as the first woman lawyer in Newport.

In her first case, the clients were seven businessmen in the Mill Street area. The town had put a ban on parking on Mill Street, which was a narrow street leading to the Newport-Jamestown Ferry Dock. The businessmen hired Murray to go to the City Council's Traffic Committee and argue the case for the ban to be removed, because it was hurting them economically with no convenient place for customers to park. "I raised a commotion, but I didn't win" she recalled.

VIII. Getting the bug to run for Public Office.

Florence and Paul Murray had lengthy conversations on running for office. "After World War II," Murray recalls, "reactionaries were trying to put women back in the home. They said that women could not maintain a household and do a public or political job well at the same time." In 1948, Paul Murray decided to run for city council in Newport. She decided to run for both School Committee a voluntary job and for State Senate, a \$5 a day job. The city was growing toward 37,000 people with its share of problems.

In this endeavor as in most of their fifty years together Paul and Florence Murray were a partnership. From their daily meals together to their similar interests in public service, both were active in organizations that

helped them pursue their goals for public office. Truly, theirs was a “companionate marriage built on friendship, mutuality, and equality.”

Preparing for elections:

1. Community organizations in which Murray spent her time and energies were the American Red Cross and the Boys and Girls Club.
2. Murray recalls her first campaign as an adventure of sorts, in that she was speaking from the back of a truck, wearing as most young women did in those days, a colorful dress:

“I remember the first stop at the corner of Narragansett Avenue and Thames Street. There I was in the back of a truck owned by Jimmy Maher, Democratic City Chairman. I was trying to think of what I would say when it was my turn to stand and be heard. I would be non-partisan, but since I was running for School Committee and Senate, I had to speak for both positions.”

SLIDE 14 RUNNING FOR PUBLIC OFFICE

- 1948- wins under new RI primary law
- Age 32-youngest woman ever elected
- Importance of Democratic Party precinct chairman
- Importance of RI Bar Association

For State Senate she won 4 times she defeated opponents such as: Sen. John F. Fitzgerald in 1948 and 1952, Rear Admiral Charles Andres ret 1950 and City Council man James S. O'Brien in 1954

She also won a seat on the Newport School Committee in elections between 1948-1957

1. Members First year with whom did she serve Newport?

Mrs. Kathleen Williams Jemail, a Pembroke graduate, whose husband owned the *Newport Daily News*.

Harold E. Coogan, a Columbia University graduate, was a retired teacher.

Mason Rector owned *The Newport Creamery*,

John P. Harrington owned W.K. Covell Company,

and Louis S. Murphy ran a grocery market chain.

Harry Feigelman, Edward Corcoran, and William MacLeod were lawyers. MacLeod, who was voted in as School Committee Chair, was a former majority leader in the House and owned The Boston Store.

John Conron, voted in as vice chairman, worked for Swift and Company.

Other committee members included: J. Irving Shepley, a tinsmith, and Charles Gifford, a retired electrician.

2. Outspoken for what she believed was right. In the second meeting, Murray spoke up and Chairman MacLeod told her not to do so. She answered him, "I'm going to talk whenever I want. I was elected by more votes than you." Another committee member of some years, Mr. Gifford, later told her father, "Your daughter has been off island too long,"

SLIDE 15 ACCOMPLISHMENTS ON SCHOOL COMMITTEE

Over ideas that came to fruition.

- Equal pay for equal work.
- Promotions based on merit not gender.
- Credit on the salary schedule for those who had served in the military.
- Other ideas that she strongly supported: technologies in the classroom such as mimeograph machines and film projectors.
- Tuberculosis testing, hot lunch programs, and driver education,

5. As chair she guided the building of three NEW schools to relieve overcrowding [Rogers, Sullivan, and Underwood originally planned for those who were handicapped]. The new Rogers High School design as a campus setting was particularly important to Murray, who often spoke Newport having community college classes on the campus.

SLIDE 16 RI STATE SENATE

D. State Senate 1948-1956

1. Singularity of her election-she was one of 83 Democratic women nationwide-twice as many Republican women won election, but still very small in number in our nation's state legislatures. She was at the forefront of change.

Murray was also the youngest RI woman ever elected and the first female lawyer.

2. First days: The first days in the General Assembly were set aside for the Governor's bills; traditionally they went in the hopper first.

However, Murray offered several bills that first day. Her response to her more seasoned colleagues who objected to departure from tradition was that, having been elected to serve her constituents, she would stand up and offer her bills. She thus broke protocol when she submitted her first items on opening day 4 January 1949, Senate bills 4-7. Senate 4 (S. 4) requested state authorities to cooperate with the United States Navy to clean up sources of pollution in the waters near the city of Newport

S. 5 called for the state director of education to examine ways to secure more U.S. congressional money to fund Rhode Island education

S. 6 requested of the state director of public works a timetable for the construction of West Main Road, a major passageway into Newport that was not entirely paved

S. 7 sought to create a Narragansett Bay Authority to manage the resources of the Bay. It took another year to see any of this pass as Murray developed connections to other senators.

SLIDE 16 STATE SENATE ACHIEVEMENTS FOR NEWPORT AND

RI

- RI State Scholarships
- State Aid to Schools
- Uniform Reciprocal Enforcement of Support Act
- Breaking barriers: first woman chair of RI Senate Committee Special Legislation

SLIDE 17 MOTHERHOOD

One of her great accomplishments while a Senator was motherhood.

On 31 March 1951, Murray gave birth to her son Paul. The birth of Paul Murray by Senator Florence Kerins Murray was a first in the history of the state. She recalls *The Providence Journal* headline: “Senator Has Baby.”

She had come into the Senate on Friday and “voted on the six items on the

calendar, as well as introducing eight bills of her own.” She left at the close of the gavel for Providence Lying-In Hospital. Saturday morning she gave birth and returned on Tuesday.

Justice Murray credits her parents and husband with the support necessary to continue in her career in the 1950s and on into the 1960s. First, her mother, who was in her 60s, agreed to take care of Paul as a baby and toddler at times that she was in Providence. This was made easier because Paul and Florence lived with her parents at 10 Kay Street. Also, the Murrays established the first husband and wife law partnership in the state of Rhode Island. She could attend sessions of the General Assembly in January through April and Paul took most of the cases during those months.

At this time Murray was among the 14 per cent of women lawyers who had one child. Data from the 1950s show that 70 per cent of practicing female lawyers had no children.

SLIDE 18 MANY ADDITIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS FOR RI

- **Tax exempt status for Preservation Society of Newport**
- **Newport Development Authority**
- **Narragansett Bay Authority**
- **Newport Music Festival**

- **Black Ships Festival**
- **Rochambeau Commission**
- **Fort Adams Museum and Recreation Site**

D. First woman judge in RI

Early during the 1956 legislative session there occurred a remarkable turn of events. Four openings for judges occurred in Superior Court through death or resignation. One of the judges was Mortimer Sullivan from Newport. Since the formation of Superior Court in 1905, Newport always had a judge on the trial court. Therefore, Governor Dennis J. Roberts considered three candidates names for the “Newport judgeship”: Paul F. Murray, who was Newport probate judge; Arthur J. Sullivan state district court judge; and Florence K. Murray, state senator. On 29 April 1956, Roberts nominated as judges Senators Florence K. Murray, Frank Licht, and Joseph R. Weisberger, along with Lt. Governor John C. McKiernan. Their obligation commenced the 7th of May 1956.

Why Murray?

SLIDE 19 SELECTION AS JUDGE ON SUPERIOR COURT

- Murray was 40 years old.
- She held the three qualifications used to select Judges for a state court in the 1950s:
 - Graduate of a respected law school
 - Member of state and federal bars
 - Patriotic war time service
 - Elected to public office, which showed support from her community and the citizens of RI as well as positions of leadership.

Her career as judge would build on her experiences of army leadership and political office. MURRAY was the first woman in Rhode Island's 320-year history to serve as a judge. She would serve as the first woman trial judge in New England for 22 years. As she began her judgeship she was one of only 55 women NATIONWIDE on a state trial court; as she neared the end of her judgeship she was one of only 127 women NATIONWIDE on state trial courts.

SLIDE 20 CHAMPION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN

While she was a judge, she was called on to serve in other capacities:

- Presidential Commission on the Status of Women 1961, advocated equal pay for equal work
- Chaired the Study to establish the Family Court of RI
- Founding Mother of National Association of Women Judges
- Paved the way for two dozen women judges in RI

She also served on the humanities council, RICH, and National Judicial College in Reno, NV

SLIDE 21 FIRST WOMAN SUPREME COURT JUSTICE

1979-1996 While most people consider retiring at the age of 62, Murray became an appeals court judge, a position she would work at for the 17 years.

SLIDE 22 COURT HOUSE DEDICATION

On the 24th of June 1990, to honor her many and great achievements the state of RI dedicated the Newport Court House in her name while she was a

sitting judge. This was the first time in our nation's history that a woman was so honored.

CLOSURE

SLIDE 23 1998 PHOTO OF MURRAY AT THE COURT HOUSE

Murray was a product of humble beginnings, of hardworking Irish Catholic immigrants in Newport's Fifth Ward.

Murray's educational prowess and attitudes toward achievement were nurtured and developed by the teachers, curriculum, and attitudes of the Newport Public Schools.

Murray was a product of the Newport community and she gave back to her community in full measure.

She was truly one of Newport's own-Florence Kerins Murray- Island Girl.

Thank you.