Remarks of Jules Bernstein ’57 at the Annual Luncheon for WOW Social Justice Interns on November 14, 2019

It is always a pleasure for me to come to Brandeis each year to meet the WOW interns who have spent their summers working at social justice internships funded by the Louis D. Brandeis Legacy Fund for Social Justice.

When I was a Brandeis student between 1953 and 1957, I spent my summers waiting on tables. Amazingly, I was able to pay more than half of my $700 tuition from my summer earnings. I should add that the balance came from a university scholarship. I will also tell you that I was the first in my extended family to graduate from college. Brandeis was the only school to which I applied. And I never visited the campus to sample the food or anything else before entering. I was interviewed by an admissions officer in New York City and was thrilled to be accepted into this school which held out such promise for me and my classmates. The student body then numbered about 800 pioneers at an unaccredited college (It was not accredited until 1954), but we were blessed with a visionary president, Abram Sachar; a distinguished faculty; a dedicated staff and a supportive American Jewish community.

I must add that my summers working as a waiter were invaluable for many other reasons, especially coming to learn and respect what it takes to perform services that require a unique combination of manual, social and mental skills. Having spent my career as a labor lawyer representing workers and their unions, my time spent as a rank-and-file employee helped me understand what working people do, are up against and must overcome, often (but not often enough) through unionization. But the opportunity of spending a summer in social justice work would have been relished by me. Thus, at least now, being a supporter of this WOW program makes up for lost time. And it has many benefits.

First, it provides Brandeis students with an opportunity to have useful and meaningful job experiences at social justice enterprises. Second, these important entities gain working hands to help in their vital work. And finally, there are those who are served by these organizations who benefit from their efforts as well. So it’s a win-win-win all around, times our 30 interns. Hardly insignificant, and I hope we can fund more WOW interns in the future.

At these events each year, I have distributed to the returning interns a book written by my friend, Peter Dreier, who is a professor of politics at Occidental College in Los Angeles. The book is titled “The 100 Greatest Americans of the Twentieth Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame.” It contains 100 brief but enlightening essays about social justice leaders of the 20th century. Many of them will be familiar to you, but others, not so much. The story of each describes a person who made things happen and made a significant difference in advancing varied progressive causes in the United States. Two of those you should know, since they are tied closely to this university.

The first, of course, is Louis Brandeis, for whom this university was named. I hope that you have read “Guided by the Light of Reason,” the so-called “Louis Brandeis Scrapbook,” which appears on the Legacy Fund website. (And if you want to learn more about Louis, see Urofsky, “Louis D. Brandeis: A Life.”)

The other equally familiar (I hope) social justice hero in the book tied to this university is Eleanor Roosevelt. She was a trustee and faculty member here. Her illustrious career as one of this nation’s most
outstanding first ladies and beyond has been documented in numerous biographies and films. One is tempted to think about those who will be honored as social justice heroes of this century. An obvious honoree is our own Professor Anita Hill.

There is no doubt that there is and will continue to be an enormous need for social justice leaders and activists in this century. When I met with a distinguished Brandeis faculty member yesterday, he opined that “American democracy is hanging in the balance.” By that, he meant that our political system, which requires a universal commitment to respect the norms of and responsibilities to our constitutional system, the rule of law and especially, the truth (“even unto its innermost parts”), is in free-fall with no safe landing in sight.

The revelations at the impeachment hearings presently occurring in the House of Representatives that the Trump administration conditioned critically needed military aid and support to the new government of beleaguered Ukraine on obtaining a public commitment from Ukraine’s president to investigate alleged wrongdoing by former Vice President Biden, a potential Democratic opponent of President Trump in the 2020 election, in my view, is more dangerous and reprehensible than any offense committed by President Nixon during Watergate. However, the Republican Party and its leaders have stood staunchly behind Trump, declaring in effect: “Our president, right or wrong!” Compare this with Watergate in which the Republican congressional leadership stepped forward and convinced President Nixon that he needed to resign lest he be removed from office by the Senate.

Another point worth noting related to the House impeachment hearings is the heroic action of several government employee witnesses who testified candidly in response to congressional subpoenas even though they were ordered by the White House and their agencies to refuse to appear. They were, of course, aware that failure to respond to such subpoenas constitutes a federal crime subject to fine and imprisonment. On the other hand, there are others, including the secretary of state, who refused to appear or even produce requested documents, thereby rendering themselves in contempt of Congress. The outcome of these latest political horrors remains to be seen.

Finally, regarding the perils in which our nation currently finds itself, I commend to you an article in the December 2019 issue of The Atlantic by Yoni Appelbaum, a Brandeis graduate, titled “How America Ends.” It is both prescient and chilling. All I can recommend further is that (to quote one of my 21st century candidates for social justice hero status, Congresswoman Barbara Lee of Oakland, California), we must “Stay Woke!” to Trump’s depredations if we are to save our country and its democracy from impending disaster.