

Good afternoon, Governor Scott, Justice Nolan, family, friends, and guests. Today, I have the great pleasure of welcoming Justice Nolan to join the Vermont Supreme Court.

This Court has stood tall for nearly 250 years due to its clear-headed, unwavering commitment to serve the State and provide all Vermonters with fair process and equal justice through the rule of law. In the late 1800s, Lucius Chittenden—the great-grandson of Vermont’s first governor who served as the Register of the Treasury under President Lincoln’s administration—wrote, “I had never heard so much as a whisper against the impartiality or integrity of a Vermont judge.” Chittenden described how early judges on this Court had limited education and often no legal training at all; nonetheless, they possessed, in his words, “strong common sense, inflexible integrity, and devotion to the principles of liberty.”

From teachers to merchants to farmers, these judges inspired the highest esteem in their fellow citizens—not because of their illustrious backgrounds but because they shared a vision of justice for every Vermonter; a commitment to that vision; and the courage to see it through. In joining the Court today, Justice Nolan strides a path laid by the dedication of justices who came before her, a path that both forges and aspires ever forward to the rule of law. And she, too, paves it forward, knowing this path will stretch far beyond her—and all of us here today.

So, how do we achieve this vision and ascertain abstract concepts like “the rule of law” and justice? After all, the law, by itself, cannot compel us to respect each other, cannot conquer evil, teach grace, or extinguish apathy. Human hands breathe life to justice. Without human hands, the law is as uninspiring as a glorious cello locked in its case.

It should come as no surprise that in administering the operations of the Vermont Judiciary, overseeing attorney admissions and discipline, and hearing and deciding cases on appeal, the five of us will not always see eye to eye. We will discuss, debate, and sometimes disagree—with each other and perhaps, even with our predecessors. This is crucial. Wrestling with hard questions is part and parcel of reaching fair decisions. Through critical collaboration, the law provides a pathway to truth.

Fueling our collective journey toward truth is the deep respect we hold for one another, even and especially when our views differ. Indeed, our Vermont Judiciary is blessed to have Chief Justice Paul Reiber at its helm. He, like all my colleagues, embodies the spirit of decency, courtesy, and collegiality that forms the bedrock of this Court and echoes throughout the state.

Though we five may have previously been strangers to each other, we come together as a bench. In resolving disagreements, we trust our shared goals of guiding Vermont law, clarifying the law, and increasing accessibility for practitioners and the public. As iron sharpens iron, we evolve together: I learn from my colleagues, and, I hope, they learn from me.

Vermont trial benches, too, are filled with dedicated, wise, and hard-working judges. We are all privileged to work with smart and resilient staff, brilliant staff attorneys and law clerks, and ever-vigilant court officers, all of whom form the amazing esprit de corp of our judiciary. Taken together, the decisions judges and justices make day in and day out have the potential to affirm the public's faith in the strength of our democracy or to shake that faith.

Justice Nolan joins the Court at a pivotal time when public trust in the law, the state of judicial independence, and the meaning and the importance of truth are under fire. But the imprint of Vermont's early judges remains, and all of us—past, present, and future—are sustained by the same mission: to serve Vermont with diligence and integrity. Though we encounter novel legal questions and pressing social issues, now, as always, we continually discover and rediscover, commit and recommit to justice, fairness, and truth. As T.S. Eliot wrote:

“We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring will be to
arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.”

Christina, you have already begun to hear the wide variety of cases that come before us—touching family, property, liberty, and individual rights. Never forget that while a particular case we hear or words we pen may not always have great historical effect, each case and each decision concerns an important human event.

When I was first appointed to the bench over a decade ago, my dear friend and mentor, Justice Joseph Sullivan of the New York Appellate Division, offered me this pearl of wisdom: Compassion in a judge is the reflection of the divine spark within.

I strive to live by those words every day. Justice Nolan, I am confident you will bring the law to life, seeing the inner light in all who come before this Court.

On behalf of the justices and members of the Vermont Judiciary, we welcome you to the Supreme Court of Vermont. Congratulations..