

**Kristen Clarke Opening Statement
Confirmation Hearing
Senate Judiciary Committee
April 14, 2021**

Thank you Senator Gillibrand for your warm words of introduction. Before I begin, Chairman Durbin and Ranking Member Grassley, I would like to take a brief moment to recognize my son Miles, my mother, and my partner, who are with me today. I am grateful for their love and support.

My journey to this hearing room today may not be an obvious one. It started my junior year of high school, when a teacher loaded my classmates and me into a van and drove us to a courthouse in Hartford, Connecticut, to hear arguments in what turned out to be the landmark school desegregation case, *Sheff v. O’Neill*.

As the daughter of Jamaican immigrants growing up humbly in Starrett City, the nation’s largest public housing complex in Brooklyn, New York, I had never been inside a courtroom before. That moment was a powerful display of the role civil rights lawyers play in our society. I was mesmerized and deeply moved as I watched attorneys argue for more just and equitable educational opportunities. From that moment on, I knew I wanted to be a civil rights attorney.

I worked hard in public school. My efforts yielded some lucky breaks that included a seat in a program called Prep for Prep that led me to attend a prep school called Choate Rosemary Hall -- and that trajectory-changing program is why I ended up in that van that day headed to that courthouse. Then it led to Harvard and Columbia Law School. I turned down the high-paying corporate law firms to take my dream job -- in the Justice Department’s Attorney General’s Honors Program where I served for six years, primarily during the George W. Bush Administration.

As a DOJ attorney I began my legal career traveling across the country to communities like Tensas Parish, Louisiana and Clarksdale, Mississippi. I learned to be a lawyer’s lawyer – to focus on the rule of law and let the facts lead where they may.

When I left DOJ, I carried the words of the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall as my guide:

“Where you see wrong or inequality or injustice, speak out, because this is your country. This is your democracy. Make it. Protect it. Pass it on.”

I’ve tried to do just that at every step of my career, from the voting rights project at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, to the Civil Rights Bureau in the New York State Attorney General’s Office, where I was the state’s top civil rights enforcement officer.

And since 2015, I’ve led the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, one of the nation’s leading civil rights legal organizations. Formed at the request of John F. Kennedy in 1963, the Lawyers’ Committee activated the private bar to help ensure the rule of law during the turbulence of the Civil Rights movement. I have worked with thousands of lawyers at major corporate law firms across the country who bring to bear the resources of their firms to advance people’s rights.

Our nation is a healthier place when we respect the rights of all communities. In every role I’ve held, I have worked with and for people of all backgrounds - regardless of race, national origin, religion, or disability status. I’ve listened deeply to all sides of debates, regardless of political affiliation. There is no substitute to listening and learning in this work, and I pledge to you that I will bring that to the role if confirmed.

I would also bring to my stewardship of the Civil Rights Division the lessons I’ve learned over my 20 years as a civil rights attorney -- lessons from the people impacted by my work, lessons from the wise attorneys who have mentored me, and lessons from being a single mother juggling the demands of this work.

But perhaps most important, would be fulfillment of the promise I made to myself as a 16-year old girl in that Connecticut courthouse.

As I look at my own son -- now the same age I was when I entered that Connecticut courtroom -- I remain committed to the promise of working every day to build a world of equal opportunity for all. A world where no 16-year-old is the target of hateful language. A world where no young man is racially profiled. I dream of a world that values his mind, his heart (and his exceptional soccer skills) -- and does not push him aside because of the color of his skin. I dream of that for *every* child in America.

As the head of the Civil Rights Division, I will bring the same clear-eyed pursuit of justice that has guided me my entire life. I would be honored for you to grant me this humbling opportunity to serve.

Thank you.