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Finding inspiration when rule of law appears to be under attack

In an age where the rule of law appears to be under attack, finding inspiration can be a challenge for legal professionals. But I found it in a book written by an author who shares my last name — though no relation.

In the 1990s, I accompanied my husband, James D. Brosnahan, on a short business trip to California. For me, it was a welcome excuse to steal away for an extended weekend — a brief respite from work and our four very young kids.

When we arrived at the airport in San Diego, we experienced a mixup at the car rental service. The agent handed us keys to a very sharp — and expensive — convertible.

I remember thinking that this car was definitely not in our budget. I wondered if my husband splurged for it, but the look on his face told me otherwise. When we returned to speak with the car rental agent, he insisted that the car was reserved for James Brosnahan.

Turns out, there are two Brosnahans — James J. and James D. — and both were expected at the pickup counter that morning. As we drove away in our Ford Focus, we chuck-

led about what James J. Brosnahan would have thought if we took off in his convertible.

Because Brosnahan is not a common name, I looked him up. I eventually discovered striking similarities between him and my husband. Both Irish. Both attorneys. Both started their careers as prosecutors. Both met their wives in law school and both wives became judges.

Over the years, we followed James J. Brosnahan's career — at least parts of it. His cases often made the news. In fact, when he represented a controversial defendant in a high-profile case, my husband received letters from people expressing outrage and anger, which were intended for the other Brosnahan.

In 2023, at the age of 89, James J. Brosnahan wrote a memoir: "Justice at Trial: Courtroom Battles and Groundbreaking Cases." With humility and grace, he recounts the highlights of his storied career and acknowledges the people who helped and inspired him along the way. The book is written in a simple, direct and conversational style. Nonetheless, it is awe-inspiring.



**JANET ADAMS
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HON. JANET ADAMS BROSNAHAN (*Ret.*) is a senior mediator and arbitrator at ADR Systems. She served 21 years on the bench in the Circuit Court of Cook County and has resolved disputes including those relating to medical negligence, sexual abuse, contracts, employment, toxic tort and product liability issues.

I've encountered a number of gifted, trail-blazing lawyers in my day. But the sheer breadth and scope of Brosnahan's accomplishments are mind-boggling. One might say they broke the mold after they made him. But I think Brosnahan adamantly refused to be put into one. He tried roughly 150 jury trials, argued cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, testified before Congress, worked for civil rights groups and

shaped national and international policies.

Over the course of his career, he's worn many hats. He served as a federal prosecutor, criminal defense attorney, civil defense lawyer, plaintiff's personal injury lawyer, First Amendment lawyer, securities lawyer, intellectual properties lawyer and an admiralty lawyer. He is also a teacher, mentor and a leader within the legal profession.

The matter-of-fact descriptions of Brosnahan's achievements might make some people feel incommensurate, but I think his goal is quite the opposite. He seeks to offer encouragement, hope and inspiration.

Brosnahan is unabashedly proud to be an attorney. He appears to truly believe in the power of the legal profession to right wrongs, protect democracy, empower the powerless and elevate our society. As he reflects on real-life cases, Brosnahan does not preach against cynicism. In the face of injustice and abuses of power, cynicism can be an appropriate and useful response. At times, courage and vigilance must be summoned as well.

While the public often

decides what principles it stands for — what to accept, what will not be tolerated and what must be punished — lawyers present the facts, frame the issues and make the arguments. Lawyers perform an invaluable service, regardless of which side they represent or whether we agree with them. Brosna-

han recognizes the law as a noble calling and displays gratitude for the opportunities life has given him to use his skills and knowledge to help others, expose corruption and defend cherished values.

We are living in an age marked by distrust and disenfranchisement, but Brosnahan reminds us of our

worth as lawyers, our unique and essential role in society and our responsibility to persevere with integrity for the greater good — despite setbacks, failures, criticism, challenges and the sheer exhaustion that can accompany a life in the legal profession.

Brosnahan's book left

me feeling inspired, amazed and deeply gratified. Its message is powerful, especially for lawyers. Two of our four children are now breaking into the legal profession. For Christmas, they each received a copy of "Justice at Trial." I hope they'll find it more valuable than a fancy sports car.