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Foreword

Jamie Raskin

United States House of Representatives, Maryland's 8th Congressional District

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FOREWORD

CONGRESSMAN JAMIE RASKIN*

It is a special thrill to salute the Marshall-Brennan Constitutional Literacy Project on its 20th Anniversary by contributing this Foreword to this excellent Symposium issue of the *Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law*.

Since I entered the House of Representatives in 2017, I have been away from my first professional love—law school teaching—but this distance has only made my heart grow fonder. And my time away has brought into sharper focus the magnificent and surprising educational and civic achievements of the Marshall-Brennan Constitutional Literacy Project, which has changed the lives of countless law students and high school students across America in its two decades of existence.

The project insists that the Constitution is the birthright of every American but that it only truly becomes yours when you study it, learn it, teach it, conceptualize it, interpret it, debate it, and fight for it.

Who will fight for the Constitution as the nation is engulfed not just in a tide of constitutional illiteracy but an even more basic collapse in critical thinking skills? The question is urgent and pressing. Obviously, the ACLU, the Center for Constitutional Rights, and others will go litigate for the Bill of Rights when a significant case or controversy presents itself, but who will address not the courts but the people themselves?

Twenty years ago, Professor Stephen Wermiel and I resolved that law students could be the ones to fight for the Constitution. With a bountiful surplus of constitutional knowledge and idealism but a deficit of opportunities to share their passion, law students could take responsibility for the arduous but immensely rewarding task of bringing constitutional learning to high school students. We took as our inspiration the late Supreme

* Jamie Raskin is a Member of the United States House of Representatives from Maryland's 8th Congressional District and a Member of the House Judiciary Committee, the Committee on Oversight and Reform, the Committee on Rules, and the Committee on House Administration. He taught Constitutional Law for more than a quarter-century at American University Washington College of Law and co-founded the Marshall-Brennan Constitutional Literacy Project.

Court Justices Thurgood Marshall and William Brennan, both of whom were champions of constitutional education of young Americans, and through Steve's efforts linked up with their widows and families.

The results have been spectacular. After the project took hold in Washington, D.C. and Maryland, it spread to law schools across the country, and under the guidance of some of the country's most brilliant law professors, hundreds of law students have immersed thousands of high school students in a curriculum focused on all the Supreme Court decisions that affect students in public schools, from locker searches and athletic drug testing to prayer in the football huddle and censorship of student newspapers to school desegregation and sexual harassment. Amazingly, our law students every year become law teachers and, even more astounding, the high school students go from being the passive objects of law and social control to the subjects of the class and the precocious architects of constitutional analysis and argumentation relating to their own lives and educations.

The project is of course not without its flaws and challenges, and Professor Jill Imgrund Engle's outstanding reminiscence in this volume, *There is No Dumpster*, gently evokes many of them: the fact that, no matter how hard we try, the Marshall-Brennan Fellows must each fight in their own way to make the project fit into idiosyncratic school bureaucracies and the hard lives of their students; the necessity the Fellows face to constantly adjust the curriculum to the changing demands and concerns of their students; and all of the searing problems of race, class, gender and power in American life that get compressed into a single semester and can surface at any moment.

But the greatness of Marshall-Brennan's accomplishment is that the Fellows do not run away from any of these problems but work through them patiently and together, in the process learning more about American society, the American education system and—above all— themselves than they might ever have learned before. The enduring connections they forge with their students are awesome to behold, and it is a great joy to see the remarkable things Marshall-Brennan alumni are doing now, especially when they become law professors themselves like Professor Jill Imgrund Engle at Pennsylvania State University School of Law, or University of New Mexico School of Law Professor Maryam Ahranjani, one of our first Fellows and a critical catalyst for the expansion and professionalism of the Project at WCL when she served as its staff director for many years.

You need only to turn on the TV, go on Twitter or open a newspaper to imbibe a little bit of the constitutional ignorance and disrespect that are choking American politics and government today. It is a demoralizing spectacle and dangerous threat to democratic self-government. The best antidote we have is a day-in-and-day-out constitutional literacy movement

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addressed to young people across America. In 2019 that essential movement has a name: the Marshall-Brennan Constitutional Literacy Project.

