

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN HONORARY CONFERRING Bloomsday, 16 June 2014

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **DR OONAGH BREEN**,
UCD Sutherland School of Law, University College Dublin on 16 June 2014, on the
occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa* on
Noeline Blackwell

President, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

"Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events. It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

The eloquent words of the late Robert F. Kennedy capture the effect of one woman's efforts to make Ireland a better place for the voiceless, nameless and often un-represented individuals who cross the threshold of the Free Legal Advice Centre seeking legal guidance and support. As Director General of FLAC, Noeline Blackwell has provided unparalleled leadership in establishing FLAC as one of Ireland's leading human rights organisations, focused on ensuring equal access to justice for all. Under Noeline's direction, FLAC has been to the forefront of the campaign to reform Ireland's archaic debtor laws, as well as seeking changes to housing and social welfare laws that affect the country's poorest. She is rightly regarded as one of Ireland's most progressive lawyers.

A Tipperary woman by birth and committed to human rights in Ireland long before the concept became as well known and as popular as it is today, Noeline graduated from University College Dublin in 1976 with a Bachelor of Civil Law degree. Qualifying as a solicitor, she practised in her native town before opening her own law firm in Drumcondra in the midst of the mid-1980s recession. The law firms where Noeline honed her craft were not fashionable boutique firms dealing with high profile cases. They dealt with the bread and butter matters of

everyday importance for their clients: from wills and conveyances, to repossession cases and, later on, immigration matters (making Noeline one of the few Dublin practitioners in the 1990s offering expert legal advice to asylum seekers and refugees). This depth of experience at the law's coalface has given Noeline a very grounded sense of what human rights means in practice, illustrated, perhaps, by her advice to those interested in a career in human rights to study the law on property and equity which she describes as being at "at the forefront of human rights law". Through her private practice Noeline developed what today is one of her trademark characteristics – a deep and passionate commitment to ensuring that an individual's rights are protected at that personal level. This trait is reflected very much in Noeline's style of engagement, which is simultaneously pragmatic and galvanising but always respectful and which never loses sight of the individual at the heart of the debate.

With Noeline at its helm, FLAC has emerged as an expert voice in the consumer credit and debt law arena with Noeline herself recognised as one of the most authoritative consumer-focused advocates for the rights of individuals suffering under the strains of personal insolvency and struggling with unmanageable mortgage arrears. FLAC continues to advocate for a better state-funded system of civil legal aid and to promote public awareness of people's right to legal aid and assistance.

Through FLAC, Noeline has been instrumental in the establishment of the Public Interest Law Alliance which brings together community and independent law centres, non-governmental organisations, legal practitioners, students, academics and all those interested in seeing the law work for marginalised and disadvantaged people. With PILA, Noeline has begun to connect strategically the academic, corporate and NGO worlds, allowing each to learn from the strengths of the other in using litigation, law reform and legal education as tools of change for the benefit of society's marginalised.

We honour Noeline today for her equally important work, on a volunteer basis, with a myriad of human rights organisations and causes. A former chairperson of the International Human Rights Trust and of the Irish Section of Amnesty International, Noeline has also been closely involved with Frontline – the (worldwide) NGO for Human Rights Defenders since its establishment in 2001. Her election as a Vice President of the International Federation of Human Rights in 2013 is testament to the international recognition of Noeline's authority and

reputation in this sphere. It is fitting that UCD today should, by the conferral of this honorary degree, recognise a woman who continues to use the law to give voice to those with no voice, articulating on their behalf and providing that necessary unwavering ripple of hope that a solution is possible even if not immediately apparent.

Praehonorabilis Praeses, totaque Universitas,

Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico; idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.