

Mari Matsuda from Georgetown University delivered the Fall Social Justice Diversity  
Lecture: *The Last Public Place: On Schools and Democracy*  
By Jennifer Alesio '08

Professor Mari Matsuda of Georgetown University Law School, began this year's Center For Social Justice sponsored Diversity Lecture, entitled *The Last Public Place: On Schools and Democracy* with a simple refrain, "I learned to play the cello in a public school."

With this quiet opening, Professor Matsuda offered a thoughtful exposition and heartfelt contestation of the state of urban public education in the country today. Her central premise was that the politics of "small government" that had taken hold in the Regan era had steadily undercut the *public* nature of the education Professor Matsuda had grown up with. She argued further that this failure was not only undermining the public school systems, but that the continued withering of the public sector and the shift towards the privatization of education was also undermining the democratic foundations of the country. With a market driven "you get what you pay for" ethic of education, the strong ties binding education and democratic consciousness become perilously strained as the resources devoted to the public sphere evaporate. After illustrating steady divestment in public educational coinciding with the re-segregation of public schools, Prof. Matsuda wryly observed "I am a child of the New Deal, and my children are the children of Reaganomics."

She argued that the founding fathers, particularly Thomas Jefferson, believed that popular education was vital for the continued success of the nation. Specifically, that the system of the American government was founded on the notion of a sovereign people, whom the government was meant to serve. In this service, Professor Matsuda believes we are failing, "I learned to play the cello in a public school and on my watch, I let the government pull that instrument out of the hands of another child. Something has died for us if we believe this is the best we can do for our children."

Shunning the role of Cassandra at Troy, Professor Matsuda pointed to six things which if "enacted tomorrow" would drastically improve the state of public education, and begin the revitalization of the public sphere. First, she called for quality free early-childhood education to be available nationwide; second, the training and recruitment of high quality teachers and administrators by raising pay and raising standards; third, reducing class size; fourth, reinstating music, physical education, drama and sports programs; fifth, creating social disincentives to abandon public schools while ceasing to give incentives to attend private schools; and sixth, a New Deal style public works campaign to restore the physical integrity of America's public schools.

In order to achieve these goals, Professor Matsuda argued that those concerned should study the methods of mobilization that come from organized labor. The methods that she suggested included starting to organize locally around immediate human needs that are in the individual's self interest. From there, it is important to have achievable

goals in order to convince people of their own power. In addition, a successful movement is strategic with a strong sense of connection to history and the legacy of the justice struggle. Finally, Professor Matsuda argued that activists must be willing to use “tactics of disruption with a utopian vision.”

“You are a citizen of a democracy and it is your job to have a utopian vision,” she urged, “that knowledge should take us back to our schools with in which resides all the possibility of democracy.”