

Noted Civil Rights Advocate Peter J. O'Connor to Speak at Berea's 141st Commencement



Peter J. O'Connor, a longtime civil rights activist, will address 232 candidates for graduation during Berea College's 141st commencement service on May 5 at 2 p.m. in the main arena of Seabury Center. O'Connor will be awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws degree. This is the first commencement ceremony under the presidency of Dr. Lyle D. Roelofs, who began serving as Berea College's ninth president on July 1, 2012.

A live video stream will be viewable at <http://webapps.berea.edu/stream/commencement>.

O'Connor has dedicated his life and legal career to fighting social injustice, particularly in the area of affordable, quality housing for the underprivileged, will address candidates for graduation at Berea's 141st commencement on Sunday, May 5, 2013. During the ceremony O'Connor will receive an honorary Honor of Law degree.

O'Connor is the founder and executive director of Fair Share Housing Development in Camden, New Jersey, and executive director of Fair Share Housing Center, a public interest organization devoted to defending housing rights of New Jersey residents through enforcement of the Mount Laurel Doctrine, widely regarded as one of the most significant civil rights cases in the United States since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).

The first case of its type in the nation, the Mount Laurel Doctrine prohibits economic discrimination through exclusionary zoning in New Jersey municipalities and requires every municipality to plan, zone and take measures to provide its "fair share" of the region's need for affordable housing opportunities for low and moderate-income families. As a result, more than 50,000 affordable housing units have been developed in an effort to improve the lives of moderate-income, low-income, and very low-income families, the elderly, and disabled.

Best known for serving as lead counsel in the "Camden Coalition" litigation of the early seventies that challenged the City of Camden's urban revitalization efforts, O'Connor has worked for more than three decades advocating for affordable housing and community development initiatives in New Jersey, one of the most segregated states, with the second highest rental housing costs.

O'Connor obtained his Bachelor's degree in political science from the College of the Holy Cross in 1963 before earning a law degree from Georgetown University in 1966. Following law school, he was a Rotary International Fellow in South America for a year. In 1967 he began working as a legal services attorney in Camden. Early in his career he was involved in reform efforts in landlord-tenant, consumer, mental health, and state/federal civil rights law, but it was the Camden Coalition litigation in 1970-72 that focused his interests in the areas of affordable housing, urban deterioration, and regional equity.

Other events will be held throughout the day. A pinning ceremony for nursing graduates will be held at 8:30 a.m. in Phelps-Stokes Chapel, followed at 10:30 a.m. by the baccalaureate service. A

luncheon for graduation candidates and their families will be served at 11:30 a.m. in the Alumni building. Following the commencement service, a reception for graduates, families and guests will be held in the campus Quad.

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A full-resolution image of Peter J. O'Connor can be downloaded at <http://media.berea.edu/media/2013/commencement/petero'connor.jpg>

About Berea College

Berea College is distinctive among institutions of higher learning. Founded in 1855, Berea was the first interracial and coeducational college in the South. Berea awards four-year tuition scholarships to all its students, who because of financial circumstances cannot otherwise afford a high-quality, residential, liberal arts education.

All students are required to work at least 10 hours per week in campus and service jobs. Berea's student labor program creates an atmosphere of democratic living that emphasizes the dignity of all work and provides opportunities for students to earn money for their rooms, books and board.

Alumni from Berea distinguish themselves and the college in many fields. Graduates from Berea include community leaders throughout the region, a Nobel Prize-winning chemist, a U.S. Cabinet Secretary, the inventor of touch screen technology, and many other engaged citizens who live out the college's motto: "God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth."

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