Good afternoon and thank you. I’d like to begin by talking about courage and specifically women and courage. When I first learned that I was going to receive the Brent Award, courage seemed like an obvious first thought. Why? Because it was scary to think of adding my voice in a meaningful way to the roster of women with whom I am privileged to share this award: my close cousin, Judith Resnik; my dear friend Sheila Birnbaum who taught my mother who was herself a law school graduate at the age of 45; Elizabeth Cabraser, a terrific adversary of mine from my days in private practice; Judith Vladeck, who started the firm where my mother first practiced; and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who shared a Clerkship with my father in the Southern District of New York, to name a few. So courage in the sense of believing I could join the Brent conversation in a meaningful way. Courage because so many of my predecessors had the courage of trailblazers. Joining me here today,
include: Joan Hall, the first litigation partner at Jenner & Block, Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye, the first Pacific-American Judge in California, and others. And preceding them, of course, is Margaret Brent herself – the first woman acting as a lawyer in these United States.

Being the first is definitely a courageous and often a lonely act. But as one of my sons observed, that sort of courage doesn’t really apply to me, a general counsel at a Fortune 500 company. Of course, courage is very contextual. To another of my children, this time my 12 year old, courage is not freaking out if you find a spider on your face. General Counsel and Business Lead at Pfizer is not exactly an 18-year-old’s definition of courage. So as I was sitting there feeling humbled, and since courage is often about conquering fear, I thought of the first fear I remember conquering. And I’d like to begin with that story. Mind you, it’s a story about courage with a small “c” -- a very small “c” -- but it is one of the first scary things I remember overcoming. I was 7 and in the 2nd grade.
I grew up in New York City as a young child (very young child) in the 1960s. My amazing mother had a few quirks – including her own sense (or lack thereof) of time. Invariably, I was the last child picked up from school. So at age 7, we devised what seemed like an ingenious plan; namely that I would learn to take myself home from school. This involved 2 bus transfers and, significantly, crossing a busy street with 2 way traffic. I was in 2nd grade so, unlike now, I was pretty short. So where did I find the courage? Well it’s simple. My mother. She taught me how to cross a street alone. She told me, “You just need to brazen your way across the street, stare the cars down and walk with confidence.” Cars turning in both directions, horns blaring, 2-way traffic in New York City, but her simple solution was: “Brazen your way across. Find a point of entry, make eye contact and wade into the fray without hesitating.” Good advice. There was a second part to this advice. She also told me if you get scared, find someone, probably a woman who looks nice, maybe another mom, and tell her you need help crossing the street. Brazen your way across and if you get scared ask a
woman for help. Thank you, Mom. Pretty solid advice even today.

Okay so now we’ve established that I know how to cross a street. (Or at least I do in most places other than Seattle where evidently it’s illegal to jay walk).

So what does crossing a street have to do with courage in any meaningful sense to this 51 year old? How much courage, if any, does it take to succeed as a woman in the legal profession today? Is courage an operative principle when many of us, many of my colleagues and certainly my children’s contemporaries think we should live in a world beyond gender. Do professional women still need to act as pioneers and, if so, what does that cost us?

And here’s what I’d like to ask those of us who have a seat at the table: Do we have the courage to persist in a conversation many people think is over because they believe in a de-gendered world or that these are irrelevant conversations by out-of-touch people who “want to have it all.” And yet the statistics are not reassuring. Roughly 18% of equity partners at law firms are women; less than 3% of the CEOs of Fortune
500 Companies are female, though we’ve added a few notable ones lately; and only 17% of U.S. Board seats are held by women. The issue is clearly not about entry level access or explicit institutional norms, but rather about true inclusion that demands that the dominant logic or voice of an institution make way for a more nuanced inclusive palette.

And here, I’d like to have courage and invite you to wade into the fray just a bit. I’d ask why does the question of the role of women in the work force so frequently get framed as a question of whether we “can have it all?” It isn’t accidental that this complex issue of women’s persistent inequality gets posed as a question about “having it all.” That formulation is a lens that subtly but powerfully sidesteps institutional unconscious bias and makes binary and individual a series of interrelated choices and assumptions that somehow want too much or are careless about the price our ambition costs others.

It’s not that I don’t recognize that it’s complicated or how uniquely privileged I am. I am the first to say and believe that my choices are simply that, and that no one “has it all.” I have 3 amazing children but I
am not the parent I would be if I were home full time (thank god, they say, imagining me at home all the time!). And if I were home more, I wouldn’t have the career I have had or the network of extraordinary colleagues, many of whom are have joined me here in Chicago today. Thank you.

But what’s wrong is not that we want too much or blithely think we are entitled to it all. But that as long as we allow that to be the lens through which we explain the persistent failure to achieve full equality in our own voices that will be the vehicle through which we are divided and conquered. We need to have the courage to insist on calling out pernicious false choices and refuse to remain hostage to unconscious biases.

So join me in wading into the midst of this noisy and clamorous intersection of women in today’s workplace. I hope we all have the courage to brazen our own way across what used to limit women from having the full range of opportunities. And remember when you get scared, ask a friendly woman for help. Thank you.