

Remarks of Mayor Noam Bramson

Honorary Naming of Ben Ferencz Way

May 19, 2022

This is a joyful occasion for the Bayberry neighborhood and for all of New Rochelle, a chance to celebrate – and to say hello from afar – to a friend and neighbor, who called this place home for many years, and who, even as he loomed very large in the world beyond our borders, conducted himself here with humility, and modesty, and kindness.

And yet this occasion is also something more than a celebration, something deeper and more significant. Because through Ben's example, we are called to reflect on values and purposes far bigger than our ordinary personal cares. We are called to remember a moment when civilization itself was at stake.

At the close of the Second World War, the victorious Allies were left with the solemn task of bringing justice to the captured leadership of the Nazi regime.

These were, of course, some of the most monstrous figures ever known, drenched in the blood of innocents, and it is possible to imagine some parallel universe in which the perpetrators were simply rounded up and summarily executed.

Yet the Allies, to their eternal credit, understood that the horror of the Third Reich was more than a product of individual crimes or even of national failure, it represented a catastrophic practical and moral collapse of the institutions of liberal democracy, institutions common to the entire western world and, for a time, seemingly secure in Germany itself.

The allies understood that only by upholding and strengthening these institutions could they provide a true and enduring defense against a future Holocaust.

So, instead of meeting brutality with more brutality, they conducted the Nuremberg Trials. Trials that have entered the popular imagination through both dramas and documentaries and that remain a fixture of history classes everywhere.

For those of my own, more fortunate generation, which describes most of us here, the responsibility of the judges and prosecutors can scarcely be imagined. To stare these monsters in the eyes, to immerse themselves in the evidence of crimes beyond comprehension, to bring the charges on behalf of the millions upon millions of victims, and through this methodical, painstaking process demonstrate that a system of reason and law – that civilization itself – is strong enough and confident enough to prevail over the most horrific assault, without sacrificing its core principles.

The Nuremberg Trials will always be one of history's great acts of redemption, to which every one of us owes a lasting debt, and which we forget – especially now – at our peril.

And so we come to Ben Ferencz. At age 102, the last living Nuremberg prosecutor. The last direct witness to and participant in these events. And the custodian, therefore, of an experience that resonates with ever greater importance across the generations.

That alone would more than merit any accolade we could provide. And yet Ben's service to justice and peace, to human rights and international law, did not end in Nuremberg, it merely began. As we'll hear from Council Member Kaye in a short while, throughout the course of his long and fruitful career, across the span of decades and continuing today, Ben has been a champion for the institutions and principles that make a just world.

How privileged we in New Rochelle, and most especially in Bayberry, have been to live side by side with Ben. And having been so privileged, let us recognize now our own responsibilities to take up the cause.

Consider only the most recent events. The horrific racially-motivated shooting in Buffalo, the alarming and growing prevalence of the racist and anti-Semitic replacement theory, the brutal invasion of Ukraine by an autocratic neighbor – we are reminded that evil, hatred, and violence are still very much present.

And that they must be confronted not simply through the negation of wrong, but as Ben's example shows us, also through the full-hearted, confident affirmation of right.

Thank you, Ben, for your courage, clarity of purpose, and humanity. Thank you for ennobling New Rochelle through your six decades with us. And may this naming, may Ben Ferencz Way, remind current and future generations of our capacity – and duty – to be our best selves.