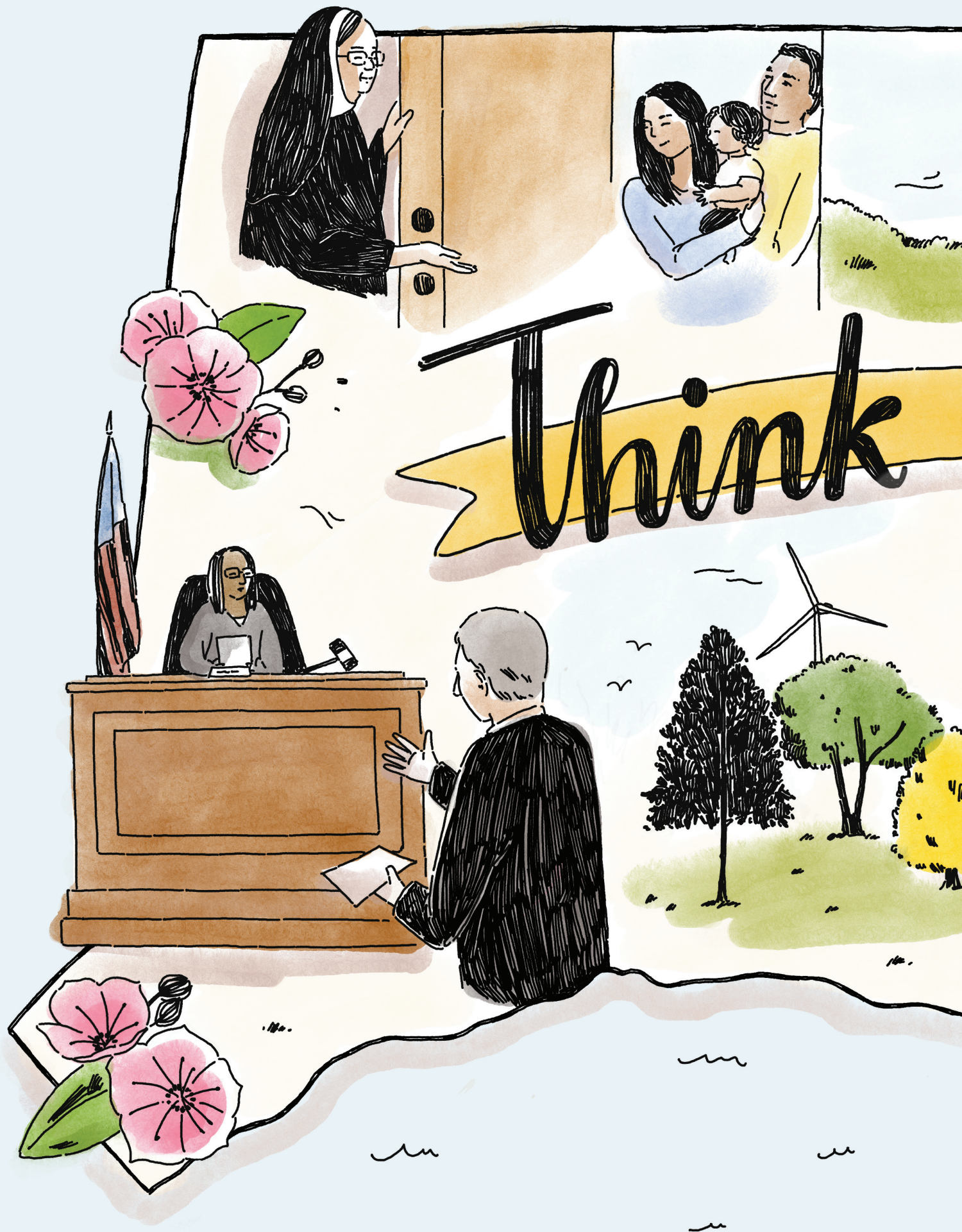
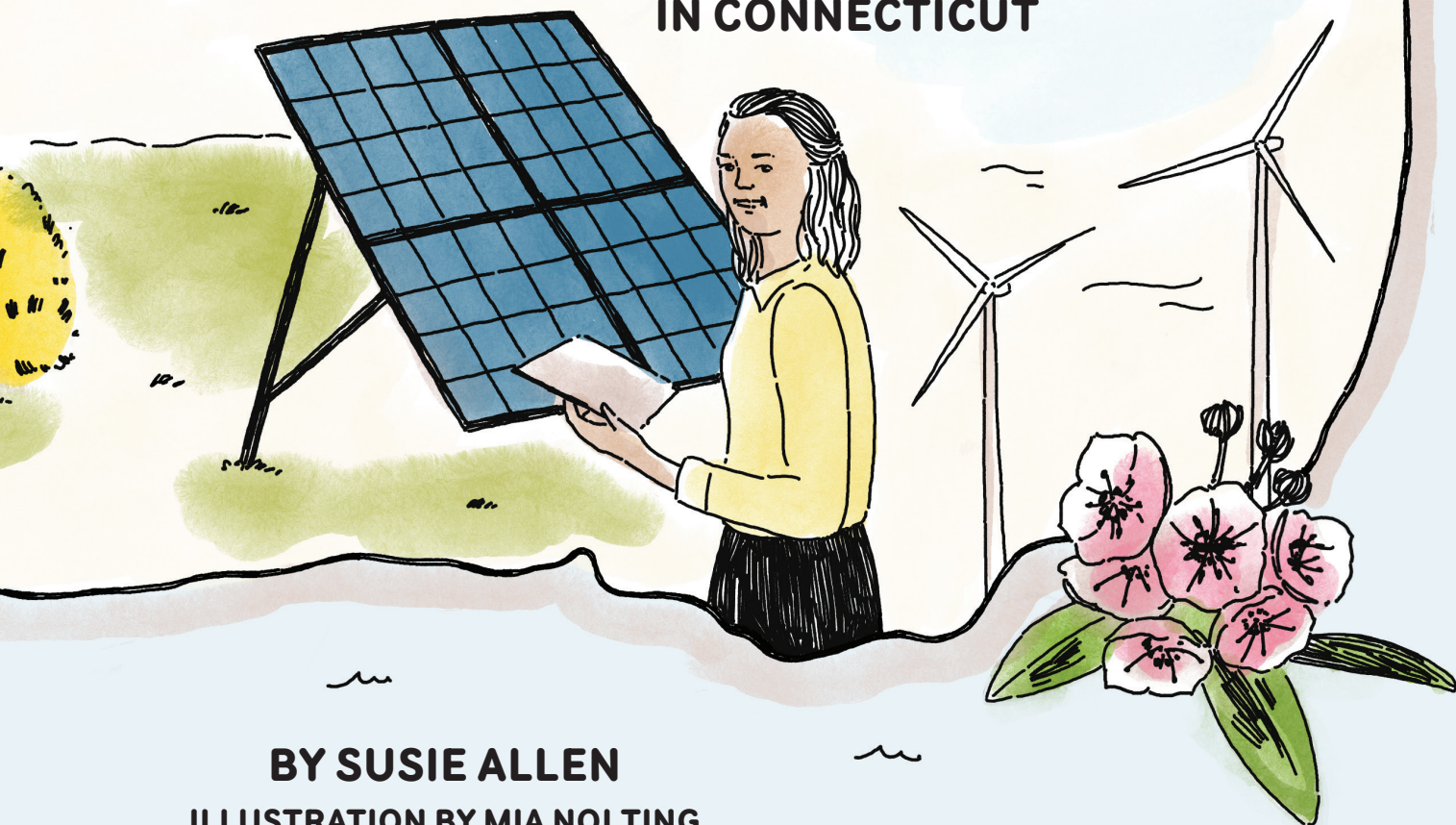






## HOW FOUR ALUMNI CONTRIBUTE TO COMMUNITIES IN CONNECTICUT



**BY SUSIE ALLEN**  
**ILLUSTRATION BY MIA NOLTING**



Growing up in New Haven, Andrew Giering '11 always had the dream — nurtured by movies and F. Scott Fitzgerald novels — of living in New York City. After graduating from Yale Law School, he got his wish, spending nearly four years as an associate at Sullivan & Cromwell's Manhattan office.

**But as he considered his next steps, Giering felt the pull of home.** In Connecticut, as compared to New York, “the bar is a lot smaller,” he said. “That makes it a lot easier to build a reputation, to maintain a reputation, and to have a rewarding practice where you have actually attained familiarity with your adversaries, with your judges, and, for people in the corporate world, with your clients.”

Plus, “I love New Haven,” said Giering, now a federal public defender in the District of Connecticut. “I think it’s lived up to its moniker as the greatest small city in America. I’m a total fanboy and booster for it.”

Giering is one of several alums whose lives and careers have brought them to or kept them in Connecticut. Their work is varied — **Skylar Albertson '18** practices at a small firm, **Sister Mary Ellen Burns '89** leads a nonprofit, and **Katie Scharf Dykes '06** serves in government — but all are committed to strengthening their state and the New Haven community.

“I’ve now lived in Connecticut longer than anywhere else,” said Dykes, commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. “There’s a good reason for that. This is a great state and a place we can really be proud of.”

For Giering, a third-generation New Haven resident, attending Yale Law School was a bridge across the town-gown divide. His grandfather, a stonemason, worked on many campus buildings in the 1930s and '40s, and his father once worked as a lab technician at the university. “Townies are very critical of Yale,” Giering said, “but I also think townies are very in awe of Yale.” He was no exception.

Fortunately, the Law School lived up to his expectations: “The professors are extraordinary,” he said. “There’s no comparison.” Sterling Professor of International Law Harold Hongju Koh — a fellow New Haven native — became “a great mentor. I just had a lot of respect and appreciation for him.”

Giering’s local knowledge serves him well in his public defense work today. “So much of our job is telling our clients’ stories and knowing their histories. It’s important to know the geography and know the territory,” he said. “I’ve written sentencing memos explaining what it was like for my client to grow up in the Church Street South housing projects across from the train station, or the Father Panik housing projects in Bridgeport in the '70s. Having that local background knowledge in my head is a benefit to me.”



Andrew Giering



New Haven County Courthouse on Elm Street

**NOTE** In June 2026, Katie Scharf Dykes '06, one of the alumni featured in this article, announced that she will step down from her position as commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

"So much of our job is telling our clients' stories and knowing their histories.  
It's important to know the geography and know the territory.  
Having that local background knowledge in my head is a benefit to me."

ANDREW GIERING '11

Giering makes an effort to serve his hometown and home state outside of work, too. He's served on the boards of Artspace New Haven and the Connecticut Arts Alliance and is currently president of the New Haven Free Public Library's board of directors. The library is "a bastion of freedom of speech and expression and ideas, and it's such an important community gathering space," he said. "I'm honored to have

the opportunity to help protect that institution. The library does a lot of great work for the city of New Haven and its people."

His nonprofit involvement also provides a respite from the demands of his job, "so that I'm not only thinking about criminal

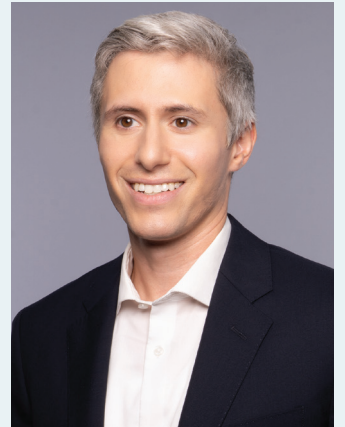
defense all of the time. Being active in the community and volunteering is a big balm to me."

**Skylar Albertson** never imagined when he was applying to law school that he would find a career and a home in the New Haven area. His plan was to return to the Bronx Defenders, the organization he had worked for after college and that sparked his interest in a legal career.

But when his now-wife was admitted to the Ph.D. program at the Yale School of the Environment, Albertson started looking for opportunities in Connecticut. The path was winding—he spent a year traveling the country as a Liman Fellow for the Bail Project, then clerked for judges including the Honorable Guido Calabresi '58 of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 2nd Circuit. Eventually, Albertson found his way to Koskoff Koskoff & Bieder, a plaintiff's law firm with offices in Bridgeport and New Haven.

He'd learned of Koskoff through the Criminal Justice Advocacy Clinic, and he knew that a fellow alum of the clinic, Katie Mesner-Hage '13, had been hired there. The firm had also been in the news for its work representing families of Sandy Hook victims in a lawsuit against the gun manufacturer Remington. That case resulted in a \$73 million settlement.

Albertson was first hired as a Theodore I. Koskoff Trial Advocacy Fellow. Almost immediately, he started to feel he was in the right place. "Within the first two or three months that I was here, I took my first deposition of an expert witness in a medical malpractice case. I argued my first discovery



Skylar Albertson



New Haven Free Public Library

"[The New Haven area has] great green spaces, it's got great food,  
it has different neighborhoods that have their own identities, which is fun.  
Connecticut has a lot to offer."

SKYLAR ALBERTSON '18



motion on a novel issue of Connecticut discovery law,” he recalled. “I was given a lot of responsibility, but also a lot of guidance and mentorship from the attorneys here.”

Today, he is one of the lawyers representing victims of the Highland Park, Illinois, mass shooting and their families in a lawsuit against Smith & Wesson. The majority of Koskoff’s work is in Connecticut, but because of the firm’s success with the Sandy Hook litigation, the firm has had the opportunity to represent other communities affected by mass shootings.

Albertson’s other cases are lower-profile but equally impactful. “All of the firm’s work is very meaningful,” he said. Helping clients secure some compensation for harm done to them, whether from medical malpractice, dangerous products, or negligence, has “the potential to help address the very difficult situation that somebody was in.”

Albertson is grateful not only for the work he gets to do but also for the chance to put down roots. The New Haven area has “great green spaces, it’s got great food, it has different neighborhoods that have their own identities, which is fun,” he said. “Connecticut has a lot to offer.”

**For Sister Mary Ellen Burns**, making an impact on the New Haven community was not a choice but a calling.

As a nun, “I chose not to have a whole lot of control over where I was going to live,” she said. Burns’s work, too, was chosen for her by her superiors. She was aghast when the idea of law school was first proposed to her — she had been teaching for seven years, work she enjoyed. In retrospect, however, she’s grateful: Though she liked teaching, she realizes now she wasn’t truly passionate about it. By contrast, she said, “advocating for my clients is something I can be passionate about.”

At Law School, it took time for Burns to find her confidence. “It was so darn hard initially,” she remembers. Taking part in the housing clinic gave her the sense of concreteness — and of mission — that she sought.

It also helped her on the job market. “I am quite sure that being a woman religious in a habit did not hurt my law school application at all,” she said, but it created a challenge when she was applying for jobs at legal services organizations in New York City. “Being able to talk about having represented people in housing court, having participated on the litigation team for a federal court case — I have to say, that gave me credibility in the legal services world.”

Burns ultimately spent nearly 20 years as a legal aid attorney in New York City. In 2008, she came back to New Haven. Her religious order, the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, had undergone an evaluation of its work and decided to focus more on immigration-related issues.

Suddenly, Burns was the director of the nonprofit Apostle Immigrant Services and an immigration attorney, “legal work for which I had virtually no background.” She gradually got herself up to speed with the help of “a very generous community” of fellow nonprofit immigration lawyers.

Burns knew the challenge of learning an entirely new area of law would be well worth it. One of the few immigration-related cases she worked on before starting Apostle Immigrant Services had resulted in her client and his spouse receiving green cards. At the time, she considered that victory “the best thing I’d ever done as a lawyer.” She’d spent much of her energy in New York trying to prevent her clients from getting evicted from their homes. With this case, “I was trying to keep my client from being evicted from a country, from a life. What it meant for him to be able to get that magic card was immense.”

**“The victories are often a little bit harder won. But that makes them all the better. Every time we help a client get citizenship, it’s got a little bit more resonance.”**

**SISTER MARY ELLEN BURNS ’89**



Sister Mary Ellen Burns (far right)

“It’s a really beautiful and terrific place for a lot of reasons,  
including the resources that Yale has, the size, and the consequential nature  
of what we do here in Connecticut.

It’s just been an extraordinary place for me to be able to serve.”

KATIE SCHARF DYKES ’06

The landscape for Burns’s clients and American immigrants everywhere has changed rapidly since 2025. But despite the challenging conditions, she’s buoyed by the impact her organization’s work can have.

“The victories are often a little bit harder won and take forever to get, in comparison to a year and a half ago,” she said. “But that makes them all the better. It is not a great time, in one sense, to be doing this work. But the rewards ... have a little bit more of a punch to them. Every time we help a client get citizenship, it’s got a little bit more resonance.”

And she’s thankful to be working in New Haven, where the city government has made welcoming immigrants an explicit commitment and priority. “It’s a good place to do what we’re doing,” she said.

**Growing up in West Virginia, Katie Scharf Dykes** remembers talking about energy and the environment around the dinner table — topics that are all but inescapable in the Mountain State, known for both its spectacular natural beauty and its oil, gas, and coal industries.

Dykes is still thinking and talking about energy and environmental issues today, now from the vantage point of the Nutmeg State. In her role as Connecticut’s energy and environmental protection commissioner, she is charged with protecting the state’s natural resources and improving its energy systems.

Serving in government wasn’t always Dykes’s plan. She double-majored in history and environmental studies at Yale, then enrolled in a history Ph.D. program, thinking she’d become an academic. But after her first year of graduate school, she realized that “while I loved researching and writing about history ... I really wanted to be able to stay involved in policy work in a more direct way.” That desire led her to Yale Law School and roles at the U.S. Department of Energy and the White House Council on Environmental Policy under President Obama.

When she left Washington, D.C., Dykes was intrigued by the possibilities of working for a state government. “We talk about states as the laboratories of democracy,” she said. She’s found that Connecticut, in particular, lives up to that reputation. “It’s small enough that you can bring people together pretty quickly ... and build really strong

and authentic relationships with folks and work together on a problem,” she said. “But it’s also big enough that when we implement or develop an approach here in this state, it can become a model for other states or for federal policy.”

Connecticut, for example, had the first statewide program to develop microgrids, localized energy systems that allow critical services to continue functioning during power outages. Other states, Dykes said, are now following its lead. “These types of programs emerge from responding to real-world challenges and crises that do occur,” she said.

In developing novel policy approaches, Dykes often finds herself leaning on skills she learned at Law School. “I was spending time with and developed friendships with people that came from very different political backgrounds, and I really enjoyed that,” she said. “I think that’s something I’m drawing on every day in my job. Especially at the state level, we’ve got a lot of day-to-day responsibilities that we can’t succeed on if we can’t work on a bipartisan basis [and] build constructive relationships with folks from across the the political spectrum.”

Dykes is invigorated by the challenges and opportunities her state faces today. “There’s been more policy stability here at the state level than we’ve seen at the federal government in recent years,” she explained. For that reason, “we’re able to continue to make the critical investments and do all the planning that’s necessary to help keep our community safe in Connecticut as extreme weather events” — including storms, wildfires, and drought — “are impacting us.”

And she’s eager to inspire others to consider state services, especially in Connecticut. “It’s a really beautiful and terrific place for a lot of reasons, including the resources that Yale has, the size, and the consequential nature of what we do here in Connecticut,” she said. “It’s just been an extraordinary place for me to be able to serve.”



Katie Scharf Dykes