

Much has already been said about Sandra Day O'Connor since her passing on December 1, 2023. The humble ranch girl grew up to serve in one of the highest offices in the land – as a supreme court justice.

You might have read about her early days working on the Lazy B Ranch in eastern Arizona. The wide expanse is picturesque, if not iconic. It is a place you'd imagine a cowboy film would be set. And indeed O'Connor's life is one worthy of the big screen.

For today's special episode, former Valley 101 producer and now Phoenix reporter Taylor Seely, and longtime Republic reporter Richard Ruelas, traveled to Lazy B to get a sense of O'Connor, her roots, and who she was as a woman of the West.

Joining them is O'Connor's brother, Alan Day.

Alan Day [00:00:03] The earliest memory is of sounds in a place of all encompassing silence. Any sound is something to be noted and remembered. When the wind is not blowing, it is so quiet. You can hear a beetle scurrying across the ground or a fly landing on a bush. Occasionally, an airplane flies overhead, a high tech intrusion, penetrating the agrarian piece when the wind blows, as it often does. There are no trees to rustle and moan, but the wind whistles through any loose siding on the barn and causes any loose gate to bang into the fence post. I'm Allan Day, and we're here at the headquarters of Lazy B Ranch. We're pretty much in the center of a 200,000 acre cattle ranch that lays half in Arizona and half in New Mexico. And the headquarters here is just barely in Arizona. But the ranch road for us is in the New Mexico before you get to the highway. We came over today to. Get a view of where. My sister, Sandra Day O'Connor was raised.

Richard Ruelas [00:01:22] I'm Richard Ruelas, reporter at the Arizona Republic. And in this audio story, you're spending time with Alan Day brother to the first female Supreme Court Justice, Sandra Day O'Connor. We wanted to look at how rural Arizona shaped a young, bright and determined girl to become a trailblazer for women. How a child raised in the southwest on a cattle ranch called Lazy B would make her way to being a justice in Washington, DC. So myself and a team of producers drove down to Tucson to meet with Alan. And then together we went to Duncan, Arizona, to see this place for ourselves. The ranch has nearly 200,000 acres. To help you visualize, it's about the size of all five boroughs that make up New York City. Alan is ten years younger than his older sister, Sandra. Together, they wrote a book about Lazy B Ranch. That's what he was reading at the beginning of this episode. And their words really bring to life what one hears when standing at the ranch.

Alan Day [00:02:34] The two huge windmills turn in the wind creaking as they revolve to face the. And producing the clank of sucker rods as they rise and fall with each turn of a huge fan of the male.

Richard Ruelas [00:02:50] Alan was also raised on the ranch and ran it for more than 40 years. Through him, I wanted to get a better idea of what influenced Sandra, the girl to become Sandra Day O'Connor, the first female Supreme Court justice. Throughout the story you'll hear parts of an interview I and the azcentral did with Alan at his home in Tucson the day before, we headed out to the Lazy B.

Alan Day [00:03:20] Well, yes. How the family came to the ranch. My dad. Well, my grandfather settled in Duncan in the Duncan Valley, built a house not right on the banks of the hill, a river, but real close. And he built the first brick house in the area. And he brought in the first jersey cow, planted the first orchard, started The first bank was on the board of supervisors in the county then and was. Pretty much a settler there, but and bought a bunch of cattle and turned them out on this free range that was there was part of the Gadsden Purchase. The whole ranch was part of the Gadsden Purchase, and the government didn't manage it. It was just land vacant land that anybody could ranch on or build a house on or whatever they wanted. You didn't gain title to the land, but you could use it for free. So everybody did. And so that's where my dad was born in in that world. And then and my grandfather built the first one room schoolhouse in the county, and the schoolteacher lived in the brick house that was his house, and walked across the road to the to the one room schoolhouse and taught all five of my grandfather's children in and taught them elementary school. But there was no high school in the county. So when they got out of the elementary school, my grandfather bought a house in Pasadena, California, and moved the family out there to continue their education, which they did. And my dad loved California and loved the beach and was a champion swimmer and really a beach bum. Loved the pretty girls and the beach and the water and had no intention of returning to the ranch. And my dad, my granddad, had taken in a partner on the ranch. Who was to run the ranch while the family was in California. But the partner was inept and basically bankrupted the ranch. So after my dad graduated high school, the family found out that the ranch was bankrupt and my granddad died. So. The family said, Well, let's just let that all go. There's no value there anymore more. There's no equity, so just let it go. And my dad said, Let me go out to Duncan and see if there's any value left, see if that investment is gone or whether it can be rescued. So he went to Duncan on the train and by his account to me, he arrived in Duncan with a satchel with some clothes in it and \$300 in cash, which was his net worth and all of his clothes. And he was afraid to put the \$300 in the bank because banks failed every day. So he he rented a safety deposit box to put the cash in a safety deposit box. And he called it is get out of town money that if the if the ranch completely went under, he had enough money then to leave town. So he went out to the ranch and.

First thing he did was fire Sam Foster, who had been the partner in the ranch but hadn't never made a nickel of profit nor ever paid for his share of the ranch. So my dad took over and didn't intend to stay there, didn't like the heat, didn't like the desert anymore, wanted to be out on the West Coast, but. He shortly after he got there, met my mother and they had a wonderful heated romance and got married. And then they both loved the ranch because they were together and shared it together and then stayed there for another 65 years.

Richard Ruelas [00:07:37] So that ranch life, what kind of values does it teach a kid?

Alan Day [00:07:42] Well, this is mostly quoting Sandra, but it could be quoting me is it teaches you self-reliance. It teaches you if you have a problem, you need to fix it. And so if the plumbing breaks, we don't have Roto-Rooter, you know, that kind of thing. So if you have a problem, figure out what the problem is and figure out how to fix it and then take care of it. And I would say, first and foremost, that's the biggest the biggest life lesson there at least be a lot of our our chores, our daily life would a lot depend on what was going on on the ranch. If we had a broken well well, then the whole crew gathered to fix the broken well. And if we had cattle to move from one pasture to another, well, we would all get horseback and. And go along with the cowboys too, to help with that.

Richard Ruelas [00:08:38] There's also things like a, like a starkness, like there's not a lot of room for illusions or pretense. We were talking downstairs about the difference between pets and work animals, how things got done. Even the book has sort of a talk about men going into town to do what men would like. There was a starkness and reality to living on the ranch, too, right?

Alan Day [00:09:01] You're not aware of the starkness because you're never around something that isn't stark. So it's a it's a matter of relativity. And if if everything around you is stark, it's not stark. It's just life.

Alan Day [00:09:40] [DRIVING TO THE RANCH] And this was the road that was just a two lane road when I took over.

Richard Ruelas [00:09:44] And as we pulled up to the ranch sign after our three hour road trip from Alan's home in Tucson, the open lands seem both vast and isolating. We drove an eight mile dirt road, one that made me glad I rented an SUV for the trip. Alan described how this was a smooth road compared to what it used to be. We passed open grasslands that led to hills and mountains. It was vast and seemingly unending. There were no apparent landmarks, at least not to me, as though I was sitting in the passenger seat next to me, said he knew every rock and Bush. But now there's just too. But this is the power line. As we arrived at the center of the ranch.

Alan Day [00:10:22] Oh.

Richard Ruelas [00:10:24] Alan stepped out to greet the current owners. We parked in front of the home where Sandra grew up. Right in front of us were the windmill she described in the opening of the book. It's a working ranch, and now I'm just looking at the slowly turning windmill, which is one of the first things described in the book and listening to it and just appreciating. And Alan showed us the water tank she used as a swimming pool.

Alan Day [00:10:56] But anyway, so this is 100,000 gallon tank. It's six feet high and 55 feet across, and it's for the horses and cattle to drink coke. But the reason I bring you here, you see the dry diving platform and the stairs and everything. It's summer recreation time.

Richard Ruelas [00:11:20] So when Sandra.

Alan Day [00:11:22] Absolutely. We were in the tank hours every day.

Richard Ruelas [00:11:26] So that summer that Sandra came here with her.

Alan Day [00:11:28] Girlfriends and my dad roped him, well, my dad there, Sandra and her girlfriends or her girlfriend that day were down here swimming. And my mother and daddy dad said, Well, we're going to go to town and get groceries. Come on, girls. And the girl said, No, we're not getting out. And they said, Yeah, come on. They said, No, we're not getting out and you can't make us. So my dad went to the barn and got his rope and lassoed them, you know, caught them and drug them out of there.

Richard Ruelas [00:11:57] Alan talked about how this place and this upbringing shaped Sandra into such a driven woman.

Alan Day [00:12:03] Quite a lady.

Richard Ruelas [00:12:04] What do you think Sandra took from the mix of both your mother and father?

Alan Day [00:12:10] Well, my dad was really strong, amazingly strong and very opinionated and was never wrong. And if you don't believe me, ask him. And so Sandra took a lot of strength, not necessarily his political opinions, but a lot of strength from how he espoused his political opinions. And from my mother, she took cooking, but she took entertaining. She just became a gracious person to entertain and did it in the same way

that my mother did. But the thing that we all remember the most about our mother wasn't as much the cooking and the hospitality, but she would sit us on her lap and read to us for hours. And I really believe that has a lot to do with interest in books later on in somebody's life. If if you had a parent that just really has patience and reads a lot. And so that was huge with my mother.

Richard Ruelas [00:13:14] Growing up on the ranch. How did you get the idea of. That over time you could become a lawyer, a judge, an author of how was it through school that that life outside the ranch was shown to you?

Alan Day [00:13:29] I think both of our parents instilled in all of us that we could be whatever we wanted to be and that we had the brains and ability to do that. I never questioned that I could be anything that I wanted to be. And then about Stanford is my dad. I can remember him many times saying that he'd always wanted to go to Stanford. He never made it to Stanford. But his story was that he enrolled in Stanford and got drafted in the First World War. And then the war ended before he actually even got involved. But when he got released, he never went back to Stanford. Now, I don't know just what he did, but, you know, he. In his world. The First World War prevented him from going to Stanford, but Stanford was the Mecca. That he always wanted. So Sandra never thought about anything but Stanford. And I saw an interview from her just the other day on on TV where she said that Stanford was the only college that she applied to. And she even laughed and said, well, I don't know what I would have done if I had been accepted in Stanford because I'd never even applied anywhere else. But anyway, my dad just was when he would talk about college, it would be all about Stanford. It was a big thing in his world. So but when Ann and I came along. Sandra was such a superstar that she. Drew most of the attention from my parents. They were so proud of her and should have been. Nothing surprised us because Sandra just simply could do anything she ever set her mind to. There just wasn't a limit. So of course we were crazy proud of her when it was the Supreme Court. But I mean, Sandra could do whatever she set her mind to, and we all knew that. Always. And the one question I have is, did she have a predetermined knowledge in her mind that somewhere she was headed for the Supreme Court and that that was her destiny in each of our lives? We have some road forks that appear. That we might get to be a teacher. If we go here, we might get to be a mine inspector. If we go there and we each have these forks in the road. While Sandra had more forks in her road than anybody I can think of, there were. Both sides were good. But why did she choose this side? And probably in her life she had to make the right turn maybe eight times. And listen, nobody is eight and zero. It just does that. But okay. And so that's why I think of the pre destiny.

Richard Ruelas [00:16:30] And I guess an offshoot of that question, the job of judge that seemed to suit her. Well, what do you think made her a good judge or made that a good job for her versus a politician?

Alan Day [00:16:44] Well, I would quote that editorial that came out about a week ago that said she was so balanced in that she didn't have a political agenda. She wasn't didn't have a Republican or a conservative or a liberal agenda, but she had an agenda of taking each case on its merits and trying the best she could to figure out how that worked within the Constitution. And was maybe more balanced at that than anybody else.

Richard Ruelas [00:17:22] Alan started talking with the ranch's current owner, Karen Sorenson. The Day family sold the ranch because it was too much Alan to handle by himself, and no one seemed eager to live in this remote area.

Karen Sorenson [00:17:33] And then making a go of it for her in four decades. You know, for a few generations, it's like it's it's so underappreciated.

Richard Ruelas [00:17:41] Sorenson was keenly aware of the O'Connor legacy and liked the notion she was carrying it on. She seemed proud to be known in the area as the Lady of the Lazy B.

Alan Day [00:17:51] You called and I happened to be sitting having lunch with her. And so I said, Well, we're doing this for Sandra. And you said, Well, to Sandra, know anything about that? And I said, Here you Taylor. Yeah. And I was so tickled to do that. I was so happy. Yeah.

Karen Sorenson [00:18:04] Yeah. And I love that. The two of you. Yeah. And I love that I'm a woman here. You know, it's a total nod to Sandra, and I think my dad had that in his brain. You know, he was kind of said, I've got a daughter like that Sandra Day. I've got a daughter who who would love to do this. Yeah. You know, and that when he showed me this place, you know, he was very clear that he had me in mind. And I, I went on and worked in downtown Los Angeles as a headhunter for 15 more years before I came out here full time. So it took me a little while to go, okay, I'm really going to make that leap. But I always knew that the lady was here for me.

Richard Ruelas [00:18:43] Alan walked us through the house.

Alan Day [00:18:46] When we were a kid. This was outdoors. This was indoors. And I'll show you. Follow me.

Richard Ruelas [00:18:51] It was just four rooms when Sandra was a girl. Bedrooms were added when Alan and his sister Ann came along.

Alan Day [00:18:58] This was Sandra's room.

Richard Ruelas [00:19:00] The original house was square, a kitchen, two bedrooms and a living room, all of roughly equal size in here.

Alan Day [00:19:07] And they both shared this room. Okay. My dad didn't get out too much. He had a corner of the living room. That was his spot. So if you wanted to visit with my dad, which everybody, he was the magnet. So everybody came to him because he wasn't out and around. But other than that. We were out on horseback or we had a couple of ponds that had some catfish in them and we'd go fish for the catfish and just stuff what kids do. So and but Sandra would always go and visit with my dad because Sandra and I had a had a real special relationship. And so she was trading ideas with him a lot.

Richard Ruelas [00:19:48] There was a clear contrast between Lazy B and the world. Sandra came to know in D.C., where she was a fixture at social events. She was asked about her childhood a lot. That was why she wrote the book with her brother. She came to realize that her upbringing seemed exotic to city dwellers. People in Arizona maybe don't think twice, especially in southern Arizona, to hear, Oh, yeah, I'm a rancher. I live. Yeah. It's makes sense every day. If she's on the Supreme Court in Washington, DC, people don't know what a ranch is, much less Duncan. And maybe it's the unusual oddness of this place. And this childhood struck her in DC more than it did in Phenix or.

Alan Day [00:20:30] Well, it's very unusual in that world to think of coming from a ranching background such as they are. I mean, that's that's a real mind stretch right there.

Richard Ruelas [00:20:44] And again, you think of maybe as Arizonans, we don't appreciate this, but people from around the country, around the world come to a place like this and pay money to go do the work. That is your routine every day out here. You know that It's that exotic.

Alan Day [00:21:02] Yeah, well, it really is. And and again, it it it totally backs up the thing that we all hear. That is probably true, but in fact, not true that anybody in the US can become anything they want. I mean, if you wanted enough and you're smart enough, you can get to be president or, you know, whatever we all this is the land of opportunity. And so there aren't these glass ceilings to stop us. But boy, is that proven in this case. You know, she started from a very unusual place to break all those glass

ceilings and ended up where she ended up, where she ended up. That's a. That's the proof of the American dream right there.

Richard Ruelas [00:22:13] We drove to a hill on the ranch called Round Mountain, the place where the Day's parents have been laid to rest.

Alan Day [00:22:20] Well, yeah. You know, here is the. The Blue Mountains or the horseshoes all around here. And then these are the bobcats and then the mountains behind that that you can't even see are the Palin seals. So you can't see anything from here.

Richard Ruelas [00:22:36] The Republic video team and audio producer took the steep, rocky hike to the top. I stayed behind with Alan.

Karen Sorenso [00:22:49] And could you introduce yourself?

David Wallace [00:22:53] Yeah. This is David Wallace. I'm a photographer with the Arizona Republic, taking pictures on this assignment of Sandra Day O'Connor's legacy here at her the ranch he grew up on. And we just hiked maybe about a half a mile, her pay up, up about 500 feet up. This really just a hillside in the center of this valley, which is also the center of the Lazy B Ranch. And you can see in 360 degrees in all directions. Um, as far I mean, it's just endless. The views are endless. There's mountains kind of on the outskirts of this valley, and it's very late in the day. The sun's about to drop. And we just discovered a headstone for Harry Alfred Day and Ada Mae Wilkie, it says, or Ada Mae Day, who I believe are Sandra Day O'Connor's parents. The years here are for Harry Alfred Day 1898 to 1984...

Richard Ruelas [00:24:06] And as they clambered back down just as the sun was setting, we spoke to Alan about the significance of where we stood and when the time comes. Your sister is.

Alan Day [00:24:18] Sandra has expressed the interest to have her ashes scattered there and me as well.

Richard Ruelas [00:24:25] What does it mean for you and your sister? What is what is that going to mean, the significance of her being here?

Alan Day [00:24:31] This is our heritage. We were raised here and it's in our blood and it's just the place we most feel home.

Richard Ruelas [00:24:41] Do you think people outside of here we're going to hear because you were talking with your sister about how are they going to allow her to be here.

Alan Day [00:24:48] Maybe they won't. You know, maybe the country wants her in another place. And I guess everybody will have to talk about that when the time comes. But she's expressed to me no less than six times that she wants her ashes scattered here on Round Mound. Sandra is such a huge person that I can't even I could spend the next hour and not even cover her at all. But she's been a giant in in America, in broken glass ceilings everywhere and been just a hero to America. And she continues to be that. And and it's broader even than that by a lot. But she's she's my hero. She didn't do it for legacy. She didn't do it for heroism. She didn't she wasn't who she was because she had an end in sight. She was who she was because she wanted to be a good person and do good things.

Thank you for listening to this special episode of Valley 101. This episode was edited and produced by Taylor Seely and myself, Kaely Monahan. Our music came from Universal Production Music.

Our host is Richard Ruelas. News direction by Kathy Tulumello.

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I'm producer Kaely Monahan – thanks for listening and we'll see you next week!