

On the Occasion of the Northwestern University School of Law Graduation Convocation

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This is a day of celebration and of joy. You are graduating law school today and, with your friends and family, your colleagues and your teachers, you rightly revel in this day which makes a major milestone in your academic career and in your journey as a lawyer, as a member of a truly great profession. However, it is a day tinged, if only a little, with a big of anxiety – and for some of you perhaps, with an uncertainty – of what exactly you have entered into by becoming lawyers. This anxiety is too often the result of an atmosphere created by the media, fueled by the blogosphere, and recycled in any number of comments and commentary, all aimed at making this point: lawyers are entering a profession in decline and law schools are of declining value – too expensive, too irrelevant to the needs and wants of the legal profession, faculty and administrator heads in the sand, too irrelevant in our rapidly changing world.

It is a relentless attack, to be sure, on we do as legal educators; and it is an attack as well on you as law graduates, on your choices, and on our achievements. None of what I have said is news to you, of course. You read in the papers, you read it on the blogs, you hear it from your friends who are not lawyers, and even from some of your classmates.

What I want to say to you on behalf of those of us on this stage, all of whom are proud of what we do as legal educators and are proud of what you have done and will do to make a contribution in your careers is this: our world is indeed rapidly changing and is undergoing

struggles the likes of which we haven't seen in a generation, maybe more. These struggles come in many forms, to be sure.

Maintaining civil society in the face of civil war, of deeply embedded corruption, of economic peril, is a relentless project, one that can seem often overwhelming. Closer to home, we encounter a flawed civil and criminal justice system and difficulties experienced each day by individuals who seek redress through our legal system. Pathologies of partisanship in Washington and in Illinois in other governmental venues push to the sidelines opportunities for meaningful social and economic reform. With respect to the legal profession in particular, the changing structure of legal services presents real challenges to our graduates on the other hand, while the dynamics of the law-business-technology interface provides emerging opportunities, new opportunities for those law graduates and law schools who can best navigate this post-modern legal economy.

Of one thing we can be reasonably certain: In this changing and challenging world, we need skilled lawyers, we need you, graduates of this first-rate, student-centered, innovative, law school. We need well-trained, mature, collaborative, ethical professionals, future leaders with myriad talents and abilities, and with a commitment to professionalism and to justice – equal justice under lawyer. We need you. To secure justice for those in need, we need zealous advocates. Kristine Bunch, Nicole Harris, Daniel

Taylor, and Christopher Coleman, individuals who served a combined 63 years in prison for crimes they didn't commit, they needed zealous advocates. For the community of DePue, Illinois who were suffering ill health as a result of polluters' actions, they needed the help of our Environmental law clinic.

For the underfunded and overworked educational community in Ethiopia and Myanmar, they needed the contributions of the lawyers and law students at Northwestern to develop law clinics to serve their desperate clients in an emerging legal system. For their governments of China and Tanzania, they needed the law students under the supervision of a skilled faculty member to develop a modern, rational evidentiary system.

When our fledging government in the 18th century looked to draft a Constitution which would provide a structure of governance and a scheme to form a more perfect union and to secure the blessings of liberty, they looked to lawyers. And, rest assured, when the state of Illinois and of our other states look to develop strategies to pull of us out of the deep fiscal and governance difficulties we face, they will look to lawyers.

I dare say our great president, Morty Schapiro, and his colleagues in the central administration, stage, has the occasional need to call upon a lawyer or two on behalf of this grand University which he leads. And I will bet that he is grateful when there is a Northwestern lawyer on the other end of his call.

In short, where there are big issues at stake, we look to our lawyers. And where there small issues at stake, wrongdoing in government, suffering of individuals who require justice, problem solving in the corporate boardroom, new, exciting start up businesses to be formed, liberties to be protected and rights to be enforced, we find that lawyers are there, and they are at the ready – to deploy their skills, to render their advice, to analyze and advocate, to be the engineers of justice, the protectors of the rule of law.

So, when the news cycle moves on to the next salacious story other aspects of higher education take their turn under the spotlight, when your friends and family stop

asking you, “hey, Jessica or Johnnie, how come you went to law school when everyone says that law schools are simply train robbers in suits?” “Don't you read the blogs for goodness sakes?”, just remember this: Lawyers were here at the beginning of this republic, this law school was here in the 1850's, when Northwestern University was a fledging institution and, indeed, where Chicago was indeed the northwest, and when the dust settles on the latest attack on our profession and the latest academic or athletics or cultural fad, the fundamental value of our enterprise will not be gainsaid. The signal contribution the study of law and the practice of law make to the understanding and safeguarding of the critical institutions of our civil society, and, last but not least, your accomplishments and legacy as Northwestern Law graduates will endure. This endurance is the direct consequence of a fundamental fact: We are the professionals who bring the ideal of liberty, of equal rights, of peaceful dispute resolution, and of criminal and civil justice to life. We bring society's grand objectives of the rule of law from a wishful ideal to the actual. And we in the nation's great law schools, at this law school, educate these lawyers to lead, to lead in a time in which leadership is required. That is something to be very proud of indeed. And as exemplars of this profession, and as ambassadors of justice, we are very proud of you and you should be proud of yourselves as well.