Thank you all very much. Have to say, my proudest accomplishments were on the football field, but none of that got mentioned. I don’t know why. First, let me congratulate each of you and your families on all of the hard work that has brought you to this occasion. This important occasion. I remember the day I was sitting in your seat 41 years ago, and I’m particularly pleased to be with you here today for this celebration because I have loved being a lawyer every day since.

I would like to talk about a few of the lessons I've learned along my journey in the law. First, about some of the responsibilities and the rewards that come with the privilege of being a lawyer. Next, about what really matters in the career of a lawyer. And finally, a little bit about the challenges that lie ahead.

Law and lawyers have been a vital part of the fiber and fabric of this country from its beginnings. Many of the most prominent heroes of the American Revolution were lawyers. Its founding documents were authored by the great American lawyers of the time, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, each of whom later became a president of the United States. Perhaps the greatest of American presidents Abraham Lincoln, who held the country together during the Civil War and oversaw the final abolition of slavery, was also a lawyer. Indeed, I understand that even in the most recent American election, President Obama, a lawyer, defeated Mitt Romney, also a law school graduate, I hear. As the great French historian, Alexis de Tocqueville observed when he visited America more than 180 years ago, “in visiting Americans and studying their laws, we perceive that the authority they have entrusted to members of the legal profession and the influence which these individuals exercise in the government is the most powerful existing security against excesses in democracy.” In other words, lawyers in America historically have been counted on to support the principles on which our country was founded, ensuring that the laws are equally applied to all people regardless of their status or unpopularity, and living up to the promise that every person has a right to seek and receive justice. One might say that lawyers have had the responsibility for ensuring that our government is one of laws and not of men.

While our country has been criticized for many things by others in the world, rightly and sometimes wrongly, we are still admired for these principles, not just their words, but how they animate what we expect from our governmental institutions, what we expect from each other,
and what we honestly strive to achieve. Over the last 14 years as I have served on this court, I've had the great privilege of meeting with judges and lawyers from countries – dozens of countries around the world – from Eastern Europe and Central Asia, to the Middle East and to Africa. Most of those countries are struggling with the problem of establishing a legitimately independent judiciary and a respected legal community; and the problems of corruption and lawlessness and the challenges of widespread social injustice. Without exception, everyone I have met in this context is anxious to understand the American experience with justice, and to replicate it in some way within their own societies.

One of the points I try to make when we meet is that America has not been perfect in the quest for equal justice, and that our history is littered with evidence of mistakes from which others can learn. But what is redeeming in our history, I believe, is that we take our imperfections very seriously and work tirelessly to identify and expose them, to debate them publicly, and to correct them when we can. Vital to this process, to the discourse, which is absolutely essential to the correction of our compass, are lawyers. Lawyers who are prepared to stand up and speak against injustice, whether it be at Guantanamo Bay, or in the Dorchester District Court, or before the United States Immigration Service.

At the end of his life, President John Adams reflected that perhaps the best service he ever rendered his country was his defense of the British soldiers charged with murdering colonists at the so-called Boston Massacre, and in doing so, ensuring that the law applied even to those who we most despised. It took great courage for Adams to do that and his legal practice suffered as a result, at least in the short term. But justice is its own reward and Adams carried that reward and its important lesson with him the rest of his life, incorporating it into the Constitutions of Massachusetts and of the United States.

As tomorrow’s lawyers, you will change the lives of your clients. You will change the course of our public and private institutions and the quality of life in your communities, and this will be both your responsibility and your reward. I’m often asked by law students about to launch their careers in the law, where should I start? What should my plan be? How did you become a judge? Biggest mystery of them all. And my advice to them and to you is this. It’s not where you start that is important. It’s what you do with the opportunities that are offered to you. In my experience, great work opens the door to great opportunity. In whatever field you choose, demonstrate commitment, diligence, pride in your work, and respect for those with whom you work. To plagiarize, “be the best you can be.” You never know where your colleagues will end up and how your work together and the impressions you have made on each other can change the future.

I began my legal career not as a federal prosecutor, but as a public defender, hired by a young lawyer named Scott Harshbarger. Many years later, he became the Massachusetts attorney
general. But five years after I began as a public defender, Scott became the general counsel of a newly-formed state ethics commission where he hired to me to set up and oversee an enforcement division. My experience working there in the field of ethics and corruption in government led to my being hired as an assistant United States attorney in 1982. I have a photograph of me and my colleagues in the United States attorney’s office circa 1983. I’m standing alongside a future governor, the future director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the future general counsel of General Electric, and about 15 other future state and federal court judges. We were young and committed back then, and never would have predicted the course of our careers and the importance of our relationships and our experience together. Make something of every opportunity to develop your craft, your skills, and your professional relationships. Find your passion in the law and become respected for what you do, and importantly, how you do it. Finally, I remember in law school worrying that all the important legal questions of our time and all the important developments in our system of justice were happening before I would even have a chance to participate in them. Forty-one years later, I can tell you for certain, you need not worry about such matters. The world is not passing you by. You will remake it. The most important questions have yet to be asked, and you will be both asking them and proposing their answers. The challenges and the possibilities you will face, we all will face both globally and locally, will be enormous. Do not be discouraged. Be exhilarated. This will be your time to make a difference.

Just a glimpse at what has occurred since I sat in your seat might give you a sense of the possibilities that lie ahead. In 1974, when I graduated, there had not been a single woman on the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts in its 282-year history. And there were no women on the appeals court. Two out of 70 judges on our superior court were women and five out of 150 judges on our district court were women. Today, nearly 40 percent of all of our judges here are women. Four out of the seven Massachusetts Supreme Court judges are women. The chief justice of the entire Trial Court is a woman, as is the chief justice of the Superior Court, the Probate and Family courts, the Land Court, and the Juvenile Court. In this respect, we have made enormous progress in meeting one of the challenges of diversity in our courts, just one of the many challenges faced by our system of justice. But still, we have only scratched the surface.

For 110 years, Suffolk Law School has been training lawyers who have made a difference. You are its most recently trained corps. Make the school, your profession, and most importantly, your family and your loved ones proud. Good luck to you all.