

Suffolk University Law School Commencement
Sunday, May 23, 2021
Fenway Park
Commencement Speaker
Carmen Ortiz
Former U.S. Attorney for Massachusetts

Good morning, everyone: President Kelly, Dean Perlman, Board of Trustees members and Chair Lamb, Dean Smith — thank you for those wonderful remarks — distinguished faculty, administrators, proud parents, family, friends, and esteemed graduates of the Class of 2020. Congratulations to you. [APPLAUSE]

I can't tell you how delighted I am to be here celebrating your exceptional achievement of graduating last year in the midst of a pandemic that forced you to prove your grit. Make no mistake about it, what you accomplished during your years at Suffolk Law School, and since then, is truly remarkable. And this is just the beginning.

I want to thank President Kelly and Dean Perlman for providing me with the opportunity to address you today, along with graduate Connor McElroy, who you'll be hearing from shortly, and for awarding me this tremendous honorary degree. With its thriving day and evening programs, Suffolk Law is known for providing an excellent education and for training its diverse and talented student body. Suffolk is also known for its very successful and accomplished alumni who have gone on to do great things in the private sector, government, and judiciary. In fact, President Biden just recently nominated one of your own, Judge Gustavo Gelpi, from the U.S. District Court in Puerto Rico, to sit on the First Circuit Court of Appeals. Yes, one of your own. [APPLAUSE]

It's a real honor to be here, and I very much appreciate being recognized by this wonderful institution for my work in the justice system that I've dedicated most of my life to. I also want to take a moment, though, to acknowledge the family members and the guests in the audience, and those watching online today. I know the tremendous sense of pride that you all felt a year ago when your loved ones received their diploma, despite the difficulties that they encountered. But seeing your graduate today, finally in their cap and gown, in this beautiful and historic venue, well, most undoubtedly, it must be a dream come true after many, many years of school — and certainly many student loans. In all sincerity, I hope that you feel a shared sense of accomplishment because each of you has played a role in their success, through your love, your support, and your guidance.

In my position, when I was U.S. Attorney, I was very fortunate, and still am very fortunate, to speak before many different audiences. But the opportunity to speak to graduates, especially those with whom I share the legal profession, is very meaningful to me.

It gives me hope when sharing my personal story with you about that path that I've traveled and the choices that I have made to lead me to where I am today. You will realize that despite life's challenges and adversity, you can overcome them to find your happiness, your success, and your mission in life.

As I prepared for today's commencement address I asked myself, what inspirational words of wisdom can I impart to you? What would I have wanted to learn or hear when I was in your shoes? And then I realized, I was never in your shoes. You are a class like no other.

Last year, as we were heading towards spring, and all of you were focused on finals and bringing your law school years to an end and studying for the bar exam, everything came to a halt. Last March, when schools, government agencies, businesses, restaurants, and travel essentially shut down, we were all paralyzed in place as we figured how to move forward in the face of an unknown virus that was extremely contagious, spreading fast and causing great illness and loss throughout the world.

As you adjusted your lives to living almost completely remotely, the realization that your last year at Suffolk Law School would be nothing like what you had imagined must have been so hard. And then the spring turned into summer. We all were confronted with the gravity of systemic racism and social injustice as we struggled to understand the tragic murder of George Floyd, and the number of unjustified shootings by police of unarmed Black men and women. We found ourselves also living in a country that continued to grow more divided and unaccepting, especially as we underwent last year's presidential elections.

Given this environment, you should feel tremendous pride in the determination that you have shown to get here today. Not only were you able to graduate last year, but you also had to take a bar exam that was made all the more stressful because of the delays. But the great news is that despite those delays and the anxiety that they engendered, your class had the highest bar exam passing rate in the last six years, and that's a lot to be proud of. [APPLAUSE]

As President Kelly noted, most of you have been working remotely: at law firms in-house, at government agencies, with prosecutorial and legal aid offices, and for the judiciary, accomplishing great things. But many of you haven't yet even met your supervisors or colleagues face to face, and while things are opening up, and we seem to be getting back to a new normal, a lot remains to be seen about how our short-term lives and careers will go. You don't know what life will bring, because in the coming months, years, and even decades, each of you will follow plans and unplanned paths. Your careers will be guided by many things, from your personal life to your changing interest, and to what may be happening worldwide.

Graduates, I am living proof that with hard work and perseverance, you can accomplish anything that you set your mind to, and I say that with confidence, because when I look out at you, I am reminded of myself so many years ago.

As a young Latina girl, growing up in the housing projects of Spanish Harlem in New York City, I could never have imagined that in my lifetime I would be delivering a commencement address. All I was sure of was that in high school I yearned to be a lawyer. It was watching a lot of “Perry Mason” episodes on television that inspired my passion. Now, that’s the “Law and Order” show of my time, for those of you who have no clue who Perry Mason was, or is.

I’m the oldest of five children, and my parents are from a small town in Puerto Rico. Neither one of them spoke any English when I was born, and both of them had limited education, not even a high school degree. They moved to New York City for a better life.

And even though my parents had very little, they instilled in me certain values that emphasized working hard and studying hard. And I’m sure many of you have lived through that motto. They taught me that education would be the key to my success and happiness. And for me they were right. I was the first one in my family to go to college, and after that, my passion led me to law school, and a career primarily in public service.

There were, of course, challenges along the way. I was a Hispanic woman in a predominantly male field, but I saw the fact that I was a Hispanic woman from modest circumstances not as a hurdle, but rather as an opportunity — an opportunity to excel, to break down barriers, and to hopefully make a difference.

It was with that in mind that, as you heard earlier, that I launched my career at the Department of Justice in Washington. I then was a prosecutor at the Middlesex DA’s office, and then I joined a small firm to become a criminal defense lawyer.

My life at that point in time was certainly going to according to plan. I was an eager young attorney honing my skills. I was a wife and a mother to two little girls. I had reached a point in my life when I was at the top of the world. I thought I had it all. Certainly success, the way I had always thought it would be.

But there are some things in life that you simply can’t predict, as you now know all too well. Never could I have prepared myself for my husband’s cancer diagnosis at the age of 34, battling that horrific disease for eight years, until it took his life almost 21 years ago. I was left devastated and not knowing what my next steps would be.

But slowly, I began to pick up the pieces with the support and love of my family, my friends, my colleagues. One of my biggest supporters is my husband of 10 years now, Tom Dolan, who’s up there [in the stands] supporting me again. But I think the real reason he’s here today is that he couldn’t pass up the opportunity to be in this great ballpark, and facing the Monster in the field.

I was a federal prosecutor at the U.S. Attorney’s office when the position of U.S. Attorney became available under President Obama’s administration. And it was an honor and a privilege when he appointed me to serve as the chief federal law enforcement officer, in particular because I was the first woman and the first Latina to serve in that role in Massachusetts.

And looking back at those 7½ years as U.S. Attorney, I could not have been prouder to have been part of the Department of Justice family. A lot of my time back then was spent on criminal justice efforts that focused on prevention and intervention, and on being smart on crime, not just tough on crime. Civil rights enforcement was also a top priority, and I take great pride that I established the first civil rights unit, as you heard earlier, at the U.S. Attorney's office.

In that role I had the privilege of working with the most talented and devoted law enforcement officials in this country, and that was evident during the weeks following the horrible events during the bombings at the Boston Marathon, a day that was typically reserved for celebration of our patriotic heritage. That was the most challenging case and most difficult week during my tenure, in which I met countless individuals, innocent victims, survivors, who exhibited strength, courage, and resilience as they faced different hardships.

On that day of April 15, 2013, two bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, and on that day, this city was shaken to its core. But Boston did not falter. Ordinary people chose to act and risked harm to help others, as well as professionals who risked their lives to save us until we restored peace to our community.

There were many examples of people coming together when we needed it most. And if there is anything that I have learned from that event, it's that people, when needed, will come together and look out for one another. You saw countless examples of that during the pandemic. And when it came the Marathon tragedy, many of the survivors and their families supported one another during the course of that case, and continued to do so today through a number of foundations that they have established for supporting and remembrance.

Surrounding yourself with people who believe and support you; not being afraid to ask for help; never giving up on what you want to achieve; and acts of kindness — all of these things can enable you to overcome whatever life may throw your way.

As you leave here, there are many ills facing the country which the pandemic exposed, relating to race, wealth, and class. We learned painfully that your zip code could determine your chance of being offered a job, receiving healthcare, being incarcerated, or succeeding in life.

As emerging lawyers, you will have the opportunity to address the challenges posed by racial inequities, the widening economic gap, climate change, an intensifying political divide. You are young lawyers in the legal profession at a moment of profound change. You may be tempted to criticize the failure of government, or worse, to sit silently by. But that is not what Suffolk Law prepared you to do.

As we heard President Kelly talk about earlier, I have no doubt that the foundation laid by Suffolk Law School has given you the tools to make a difference and meet your full potential. Remember that as you strive to achieve success in whichever way you define it and accomplish

your goals, giving back to your community should be part of the plan. And many of you, most of you, have exhibited that already.

It is easy to be cynical and to think that the system is stacked against you. But change happens from within, especially in addressing the necessary reforms that we need in law enforcement and in government. There's no question that responding to these challenges may seem like a Herculean task, but as Martin Luther King once said, "Never, never be afraid to do what's right, especially if the well-being of a person or animal is at stake. Society's punishments are small compared to the wounds that we inflict on our soul when we look the other way."

So, dear graduates, you cannot look the other way. And most of you have not. Your voices, your passion, your commitment, your diversity, and your vision are desperately needed to build a more equitable and just society. And you have never been better prepared, because you are a class like no other. That is your mission, and that, Class of 2020, is your responsibility. So congratulations, and thank you for allowing me to share this moment with you. [APPLAUSE]