

Suffolk University Law School Commencement
Sunday, May 23, 2021
Fenway Park
Commencement Student Speaker
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Good morning, members of the Board of Trustees, President Kelly, Dean Perlman, esteemed members of the faculty, administration, staff of the Law School, beloved family and fellow graduates. Welcome.

Congratulations to the Class of 2020. What a great day to celebrate a year that has been primarily defined by immense loss. For some of us in the Class of 2020, our law school experience started with the loss of our beloved Professor Wittenberg. The global pandemic created even more losses, which ended extracurricular competitions, in-person classes and law school as we knew it. This disruption continued throughout the bar exam. And, as we have all learned, drinks over Zoom just aren't the same. Even today our celebration is limited.

The Class of 2020 sits in a fairly unique position in history. And our position is determined by our location in time and space.

For our location in time, the Class of 2020 shares an odious inheritance with the classes of 1903, 1929, 1933 and 2009 of graduating within a recession or economic depression. We share the burden of the Class of 1918 of graduating amidst a global pandemic. We share the distinction of the Class of 1968 of graduating in a year defined by global protests for justice. The classes of 2020 and 2021, have had the great privilege of experiencing the calamities that defined previous classes synthesized into one great calamity.

Now for our position in space. Today the Class of 2020 is in 4 Jersey Street, in a city filled with history. Today we sit only four miles and 251 years away from an example of State violence against protestors which resulted in the murder of a young Black man, inspiring calls for our Revolution. We are only two miles away from a great reformer of this American experiment, Charles Sumner, and we're only two miles away from a great perfecter of this American experiment, a temporary resident of Boston, Martin Luther King, Jr. These markers aren't just a collection of interesting facts about Boston, but a reminder that as even brief residents of this City, we're connected to our city's history.

The previous two years have featured awful flashbacks from our worst moments in our history, from police brutality, to the storming of a Capitol, to a global pandemic which disproportionately affected our most marginalized. These two years have taught us that history is not passive and historical sites aren't just a place of quiet contemplation, or a nice place to take a picture, but that these sites are markers of a continued struggle, that the issues of the past aren't truly gone.

We are only five miles away and 16 years away from when then-Senator Biden instructed a different Suffolk class in a most solemn request that defines the struggle for the soul of our nation. He requested that we appeal to the better angels of our nature.

There have been countless other speakers before who instructed various Suffolk law classes on the importance of maintaining our higher ideals. Let their words and mine not fall into a historical memory of a nice place to take a picture. Instead, take their words seriously. We have all been trained in a profession that emphasizes that, for the most part, words matter. They have impact.

Speaking of being trained, I think it's important to think about where the Class of 2020 started from. Here the Class of 2020 sits, two and a half miles and almost four years past from where most of our law school journey began. Where then-Judge Georges of the Boston Municipal Court (now Justice Georges of the SJC) welcomed us to Suffolk Law and instructed us that our name must mean something. For three, four and, for some of us, only two years, we spent trying to figure out what our name would mean.

It has been noted by a previous student speaker that this journey of self-actualization was grounded by steps in virtue. Another student speaker compared this journey of self-discovery to the steps of dealing with grief. Whether it's seven stages or steps of virtue, we did not get through this process alone. Our primary guide during the journey was the faculty of Suffolk Law, who propelled us forward through their great instruction. Today we are all recipients of the great alchemy of higher education that produces more than the sum of its parts. We also share a more specific transformation that modulated young, curious and empathetic students to old, embattled litigators who disagree over the definition of the word is.

We learned that if you want to know anything about rap, the best person to ask is an old white guy from Brooklyn. Now that is my legally obligated Rules Against Perpetuities joke, but if some of you wish to support Professor Beckerman-Rodau's musical career, you can find him on SoundCloud under Lil' Restrictive Covenant.

During our time we were taught to question our assumptions like whether or not the coffee served in the cafeteria was really the brand that was on the label. We learned that some questions were better left unanswered, like how many times the elevator you were riding in Sargent Hall had stalled that day. Professor Bishop, aside from teaching us the finer points of contract law, taught us it's better not to know what exactly is in a hotdog or a baloney sandwich.

For most of our law school experience the question of what our name would mean was primarily an exercise in developing technical competence. But the tail end of our law school experience included nontechnical components, primarily the responsibility of professional ethics. The expansion of what our name would mean grew once again for those of us who are barred and expect to be barred. We swore fidelities to the Massachusetts and United States

Constitution. The journey of what our name must mean doesn't end at technical competence, or when the legal requirements are met, but it continues. It remains an open question of how your name will be remembered.

The study of law in its most abstract is the study of relationships. Various legal doctrines compete over the proper principle, guiding the dispute between those relationships, between justice and efficiency. In our continuing pursuit of understanding what our name will mean, it is important to take stock of when calamities change certain relationships that the law must meet the need of those changes. We must acknowledge not just our collective responsibility as global citizens, or Americans, but a responsibility as lawyers, that we did not inherit a profession of rote application, but reasoned application. That as we continue to attempt to answer the question of what our name will mean, we must also attempt to answer the question of what the law must do.

It is now known where the class of 2020 is. It remains an open question the role that each of you will play and the changes that are required in the law, whether we will be witnesses, reformers or perfectors to the changes that are needed. I encourage this class to carry the mission of Suffolk Law, of honesty and diligence, into all of your work. The work of what your name will mean remains a work in progress, but it certainly wouldn't hurt to have those two adjectives on your side.

Congratulations to the Class of 2020 and thank you. [APPLAUSE]