

Suffolk University Law School Commencement
Saturday May 22, 2021
Fenway Park
Commencement Student Speaker
Tracy Bindel, JD'21

Wow, our first Saturday of freedom and somehow all of us managed to roll out of bed and get here by 8 a.m.!

A warm and heartfelt welcome and thank you to the Board of Trustees, President Kelly, Justice Georges, deans, faculty, staff and administrators who made today happen. Welcome, students and families and friends. I have not seen most of you in person since February of 2020 — and it is so good to finally be off mute. Hello and welcome also to all of those joining us via live stream.

Remember all the cases we've read, all the briefs, the memos submitted, the light bulbs kept on in the late hours of the night. It's all over! We made it to this moment and, serendipitously, this moment is in one of the best spots I could imagine for a graduation.

I want to start by acknowledging the many people — currently, about 3.5 million — whose lives we have lost in the global pandemic. Some of those are our family and our friends. I also want to acknowledge the more ambiguous losses that have marked our final year as students. This pandemic has left its mark on all of us, and yet we are here today because joy and celebration matter, even amidst the grief.

Graduation is a time of ritual and ceremony. We don't have a lot of ritual left in our society. So, as we move into our ceremony today, I invite you to think of this day, in the next few weeks, as the picnic that you eat after an arduous hike up to the top of a mountain. We've hiked a long way to get here and we still have the way down. But for now, can we just sit and rest and enjoy this amazing view? It's time to celebrate just how far we have come.

Each of you knows exactly where your hike up this mountain started. I stand before you today as a first-generation law student and the first person in my family to get my JD. I'm here today as someone whose family has been impacted by police violence and the prison system.

In 2015, my cousin Zack was in a shootout with the police. When I got the phone call from my mom that he was recovering in a hospital after being shot, I had to process righteous anger and a lot of shame. I knew that he did not deserve to be shot at, even if there was a warrant out for his arrest. Soon after his arrest and that phone call I decided to attend this law school, because I wanted to advocate with compassion and care for people like my own family as they navigated the court system, as well as their own feelings of fear and shame.

The mountain trail of law school has been full — sometimes too full — of important decision points. From the moment you applied, to the countless moments that you wanted to give up

and take a different path, to the moment that you realized that you made your first lifelong friend here, to the moment that you got accepted into a journal or a clinic that you had been working toward.

On top of the usual difficulties, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our educational experience more than we may ever really know. If law school is a hike up a huge mountain, the pandemic is a two-mile stretch on that hike that is flooded out with no way to turn back. We came prepared for a lot of situations on this hike. We even brought a bear horn in case there were bears. But who could have anticipated that two miles of the trail would be under water?

Finishing law school during a pandemic has taught me that just like on any hike, we never really know how it's going to unfold, even if we've planned and are prepared. All that we can really do is walk forward with openness and presence to reality, grounded and ready to respond to whatever comes. And oh, isn't that so much easier said than done?

I don't know about you, but I could not have dreamed of this law school experience. Four years ago when I started as a night school student, I didn't know I would love entrepreneurship law. Shout out to contracts Professor Lipshaw who told us on Day One we would either love him or hate him. I loved him. I did not know that I would take a summer internship in Oakland, California, or that I would come to admire housing attorneys like Ed Rice so much. None of us knew that we would finish law school online. The legal field in fact has changed radically and spread to new roles that were hardly imaginable, even three years ago.

This unexpected flood in the path has brought a lot of clear vision about many things, even though there's still uncertainty about others. It is clear now that this flood, this pandemic, will forever transform the terrain of our lives.

Now we see clearly just how much the future of the judicial system depends on our ability to innovate and to grow to ensure people have access to the judicial process that they were promised. We also see how essential it is that our legislative and judicial process work alongside communities of color, to end mass incarceration, transform the police and make repair. We noticed the unprecedented financial shifts throughout this pandemic that will play out over the course of our careers, legal or not. Small businesses continue to struggle and large corporations are growing larger and more engaged politically. We've watched politics polarize our communities and many of us continue to navigate those tensions at home, at work and in our relationships.

And all the while we have a lot of clarity of how important each other really are when everything else has been shifted away. Our hiking buddies make or break our climbs every single time.

The faculty and staff and administrators of this University have modeled to us what compassion and caring in the midst of uncertainty really looks like. Sometimes it's even in the little things. A

special thanks to Dean Ferrari and Dean Santos for finding me this gown today after the one I was sent was 13 sizes too big.

I hope as you graduate today, you can see that our legal education taught us so much more than foundational legal principles. It asked us, again and again, to move with integrity through emerging complexity. It taught us how most of life and good lawyering is about connecting and caring for the people we meet along the way, be it client or colleague. It taught us the power of the law that impacts humans every day for the better and the worse. This credential will forever shape us and with it we will shape the world. It is no small accomplishment and no small responsibility.

And here we are, we did it. We made it through law school. We made it to the top of the mountain. And as you hike back down, taking the bar exam, applying and starting new jobs, and discerning what really is your work to do in the world, may you remember this picnic view. May it steady you for whatever comes.

With ours legal careers still before us, there will be more hills and mountains to climb, albeit with more floods and amazing views. And I hope there's a lot of picnics and rest along the way. I hope that we can keep climbing these mountains with our hands wide open to all that life may bring us, expected or not. My hats off to you, Suffolk University Law School class of 2021.
[APPLAUSE]