

Suffolk University Law School Commencement

Sunday, May 22, 2022

Leader Bank Pavilion

Commencement Speaker

The Honorable Claire Cronin

US Ambassador to Ireland

Thank you for the very kind introduction. President Kelly, Chair Lamb, and members of the Board of Trustees, Provost Sandell, Dean Perlman, thank you all for having me here today.

And to the graduates and your families, congratulations. You have pulled it off through a lot of hard work, and incredible things lie ahead for you.

As Professor Landers noted, I am a very proud graduate of Suffolk Law. When Dean Perlman first approached me with the opportunity to be with you here today, I was thrilled to be asked, and very, very grateful for the opportunity. But the next thought that went through my mind was, “Did anyone actually look at my transcript?” Let’s hope not.

All kidding aside, the law I learned at Suffolk has served me—and I hope the people I’ve represented—well. The people you meet in life, personally, professionally, will see the JD, know that you’re an attorney, and that you’ve put in the time and work to become a lawyer.

But you’ll remember the lessons you learned in the classroom, the collaborative education you derived from working in groups, the eureka moment when you finally figured out case law one night while poring over your notes. And you’ll remember the friends that you made here. Some of my friends from Suffolk Law are sitting in the audience today and are the proud parents of graduates. I won’t embarrass the graduates by identifying them. You know who you are.

I still remember my first day of law school, which occurred before most of you were born. It was September 1982. David Sargent, who was then the dean of the Law School, told our incoming class something that has stuck with me all of these years. He said, “You will never think the same way again after attending law school.” Not just act, not just write or speak a different way. Never *think* the same way again.

I suspect many of you, after three or four years of law school, would agree with that. And for me, 40 years later, it has held true. Because a legal education, a good one like the one we received at Suffolk, imbues in you an ability, an eagerness, even, to look at all sides of every issue. Not just to weigh different variables dispassionately, but to truly examine the intricacies of each, to explore the specific dynamics of every argument, bringing the knowledge you’ve amassed and the mental agility you’ve developed to every problem, to every case.

And that's transferable, not just to the courtroom in a legal career, but to life. The ability you've honed during your time at Suffolk is both a perception muscle and an empathy muscle.

You've unlocked something that doesn't just make you a ferocious litigator, or a talented advocate for a cause or client, or someone who can bring the skills they've developed here to a limitless number of fields and careers.

You've unlocked the ability to understand other people, their motivations and what restricts them. It's a tremendous asset to bring to all kinds of relationships, new ones and old ones, professional and personal, allied and adversarial.

And I cannot overstate to you the value of relationships, not just in my chosen career path, the law, public service, and politics. And many of you may think the last one's a dirty word.

It's not, and it doesn't have to be. When it's practiced in its best and purest form, politics is empathy, and relationships, and people striving together to make things better.

For me, that lesson was driven home in the building up the hill with the shiny golden dome. Relationships are everything in the legislature. Educating yourself about how a state rep from a rural district in the western part of the state, has different policy objectives than you, and why. About how an urban rep's constituents' needs may be different from those of a rep from the Cape.

When you understand these folks better, why they vote the way they vote, or champion the causes they champion, it's easier to get to yes, harder to just say no.

And that represents so much that has been lost in Washington in these last several years. It becomes much harder to vilify someone when you've had dinner with them, when your spouses have socialized, when you've actually had meaningful conversations with that person and come to understand and appreciate what makes them tick.

It becomes much easier to trust someone's word, to accept a handshake in the way it was meant when you know a person and where they're coming from.

In Massachusetts, our legislature is one of the most lopsided in the nation—almost all Democrats. A friend and former colleague of mine in the House of Representatives, a Republican, likes to joke that when Republicans turn on each other in Massachusetts, it's not a circular firing squad. Instead, it's a shootout in a phone booth.

Functionally, no matter what party the governor belongs to, if the Democratic leaders and Democratic majorities in the House and Senate *really* wanted to put their shoulders to the wheel of government, they could ram through anything that suited their fancy.

But that's a short-sighted strategy. Eventually it won't just be the partisan minority who comes to resent such heavy-handedness, but members of your own party who recognize that there is a better way to do things, a healthier way to get to yes.

So we collaborate. We listen. We incorporate different views from different lines of argument, and we move forward.

This is possible not just over a cup of coffee at Capitol Coffee Shop, or a public event where you might wind up chatting with a colleague from across the aisle. It's possible, though rarely practiced in Washington.

And despite so much gut-wrenching evidence to the contrary, it's possible on the world stage as well.

In my few months so far as an ambassador, I've come to value relationships even more.

So much of the suffering in the world could be cured if we could impart to its leaders the lessons that you, my fellow Suffolk Law alums, are taking out into the world. You are now members of the Suffolk Law diaspora, which comes from the Greek for "scattering."

The United States is blessed to be home to people with roots in every other country in the world, and I'm lucky enough to serve under President Biden as US Ambassador to Ireland, a nation that got an early start on sending its tired, its poor, and its huddled masses to our shores.

And while I've learned much in my first four months in the job, I still have much more to learn. I like to think that one asset I bring is the same one you'll bring to your jobs, that singular understanding about relationships and just how vital they are.

Diplomacy is improved immeasurably by solid relationships. What is an ambassador without excellent relationships both at home and abroad?

Relationships are so important among the diaspora, both with the new faces they meet in their new country, and with the folks back home. It's about common roots, about the immigrant story, that most Americans share. And yes, my own ancestors fled economic hopelessness and came from Ireland. Everyone, all of us, comes from somewhere. And all of us brought something to our new home.

And you'll do the same as you scatter. You'll scatter to nonprofits and to small family practices, big firms and government agencies. Some of you will thrill to the courtroom, some of you to teaching, some a career in public service.

And you'll bring something, too: the knowledge and relationships you've worked on during your time here, the openness to ideas that don't always jive with your own, the mental acuity to shy

from rigid ideology in favor of truth, the worth and effort that you put into relationships, the trust in the handshake.

I am privileged to have stood once where you are now. And while I would trade many things for the chance to go back and have everything before me as you do now, one thing I wouldn't give up would be the benefits I've derived from the lessons that I learned here at Suffolk Law.

So I want to thank you all and wish you the best of luck. May your experiences be similarly rewarding, and in the words of an old Irish blessing, may the wind be always at your back, and may God bless the United States of America. Thank you.