

Suffolk University Law School
Commencement 2026

Honorary Degree Speaker
Cheree McAlpine, JD '94

Thank you, Dyane. Those were wonderful words.

To President Kelly, Dean Pearlman, our Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, my fellow alumni, friends, family, and yes, finally, to you, the Class of 2026. Congratulations.

[APPLAUSE]

You made it. You survived the Socratic method. You've briefed your last case as a student. There are no more study sessions. There are no more late-night study groups. There's no more crossing your fingers before you walk into the classroom and hoping that your name isn't called. You've done it. You are here. This is your moment. Today you join a profession that you've spent the last few years preparing for, and Class of 2026, you're ready. You are ready.

So as I thought about this moment standing in front of all of you, what do I say? How do I send this class off into the profession with some insightful, encouraging words? How do I take 30 years of practicing law and distill it into ten minutes in a way that is befitting of this distinguished moment? What can I share?

As Dyane just mentioned, and if you've heard any of my speeches or any of my interviews, you frequently heard me say that the first time I ever met a lawyer was right here at Suffolk. You've also heard me say that so much of what I know about being a lawyer was shaped by what I saw on TV. So even after I graduated from law school, I joined a profession that TV had prepared me for, or so I thought.

And I was reflecting on TV or Netflix lawyers and the lessons I've learned over the last 30 years, here's what I can tell you. There are some things that TV gets right. It's high stakes. It's intellectual. It's competitive. There's pressure. Winning is good. Losing is bad.

But there are so many things that TV gets incredibly wrong. According to TV, being a lawyer means dramatic courtroom entrances, profound cross examinations delivered without notes. Innocence is dramatically proven. Important deals always close. In the courtroom, closing arguments are so powerful that sometimes even the jury cries. Everything is beautifully packaged. Everyone looks great while doing it. And it is all resolved in under an hour.

Well, I'm sure it doesn't come as a surprise to you that that's not entirely correct.

First, TV lawyers don't reveal how much of your job will involve writing. Not dramatic closing arguments or last-minute motions delivered to a packed courtroom, but emails. Endless correspondence. Carefully worded updates. Thoughtfully framed questions. Diplomatic follow-ups. As a first year, you may write an email five times and then read it three more times before you press send.

On Netflix, the law always looked like a performance. In reality, it's about precision. Every email carries weight. You're thinking about tone. You want to be competent but not arrogant, direct but not abrupt. You're anticipating how a single sentence will be interpreted. A misplaced word can create confusion. An unclear request can cost time. A rushed response can reflect poorly on you and the team.

And because you're new, the pressure seems amplified. You will learn quickly that writing isn't just communication. It's representation.

So let me tell you, unlike TV, you're going to write briefs that nobody's going to clap for. Contracts that nobody will read until something goes wrong. Memos that exist solely to help someone else make a decision. And you will learn that being clear is way more impressive than being clever, and accuracy matters way more than just sounding smart.

TV doesn't tell you that most legal problems are not solved by dramatic victories, but by all the moments sitting at your desk or in meetings trying to prevent a problem from happening. A

lawyer's best work often happens before anyone is angry, before anyone is sued, and before anyone ends up in court. It happens when you ask one more question, when you flag one more risk, and when you send one more carefully crafted email.

On television the hero always wins the case. In reality, the hero helps the client avoid needing one.

On Netflix, the champagne always pops when the billion-dollar deals close. In reality, the best thing for the client may be to walk away from the deal.

And TV doesn't tell you how much of your job is about people. There will be moments when your empathy and your compassion and your ability to connect with people will matter so much more than the law. Clients will come to you scared, frustrated, confused, and sometimes just convinced that they're completely right. Listening can be your legal superpower. It requires patience, restraint, and genuine attention. It means hearing not just the facts that they share with you, but the fears and emotions and expectations that lie beneath those facts. When people feel truly heard, they begin to trust you. And often it is that trust that lays the foundation for everything that follows.

You also come to realize that opposing counsel is not your enemy, just another professional navigating the same system from a different position. They're human, you're human. The client is human. And often it is recognizing that shared humanity that leads you to some common ground that can lay the pathway for resolution.

Don't get me wrong here. Lawyers have to be bold and confident, but confidence should be grounded in preparation, integrity, and sound judgement. Boldness isn't about volume or ego. It's about standing firm when it matters, advocating with integrity, making decisions when the path forward even sounds uncertain.

So unlike TV, there will be moments when you don't feel confident. You may walk into rooms where it seems like everybody may know more than you. You will encounter issues that you've

never seen before. You'll leave the room and go to Claude. You'll leave the room to go to Zoom AI Companion or Gemini, to try to find the answers to things that you feel you should already know. That is not failure. That is the job. Competence in law is not about knowing everything. It is about how to figure things out and where to go to for answers.

You will discover that the more prepared you are, the more confident you will be.

And finally, TV lawyers don't tell you that the practice of law is, at its core, a service profession. You are being entrusted with people's problems, their monies, their freedoms, their business, their families, their futures. This is an extraordinary responsibility, and it's not going to be perfect. What will define you is how carefully you work, how honestly you respond, and how seriously you take the impact of what you're doing.

So while TV gets a lot of things wrong, there is one thing it consistently delivers when it's at its best, and that is a powerful love story.

So as I stand before you reflecting on my own legal journey, if I were writing the script, it would be a love story.

It would begin in a small town in rural Alabama. A young girl raised by a single mother with no real access to the legal profession, who somehow found herself in law school, where she discovered one of the great loves of her life: the law. Not just the rules, not just the cases, but the power of it, the power to shape companies, to structure possibilities, to protect innovation, to create order out of chaos, and to impact lives.

The story would move to Silicon Valley, at a time when the internet was no longer an experiment, but a force reshaping the world. The story would unfold alongside the rise of social media, cloud computing, and now AI, each chapter bringing new complexity, new questions, new stakes, and new opportunities. There will be scenes in boardrooms where billion-dollar decisions were being made. Scenes negotiating deals that would redefine industries. Scenes advising founders who would become icons of the industry. Scenes sitting across the table from

world leaders, and scenes grappling with how technology should evolve and how it should be governed.

But at the heart of the story would not be the titles, or the deals or the rooms. It would be the relationships. The enduring love of the work. The belief that law is not a constraint on innovation, but part of its core foundation. The idea that being a lawyer is not about sitting on the sidelines, but rolling your sleeves up, getting in there, and building what comes next.

For you, the last few years have been the prologue. The preparation. The character development. The late nights, the cold calls, the outlines, the exams, the internships, the quiet sacrifices that many of you have made that others may not have fully seen.

When you walk out of this room, Act I begins. You will start writing your own script. You will make choices about what type of lawyer you want to become. It is a story that only you can write.

My wish for you, Class of 2026, is when the credit rolls, your story, too, will be a love story. Congratulations, Class of 2026. [APPLAUSE]