

Suffolk University Law School Commencement
Sunday, May 19, 2019
Rockland Trust Bank Pavilion
Commencement Speaker
U.S. Representative Joseph P. Kennedy III

Ilene [Law Professor Ilene Seidman], thank you for that extraordinary introduction. Most importantly, your decades of dedication to ensuring that our nation makes good on our promise of equal justice. Your example is inspiring. It is urgent and today it is necessary. On your own and through the students that you mentor, you've raised up countless families and you have strengthened our Commonwealth. Thank you. We are all grateful.

I know I speak for everyone gathered here this afternoon when I say that my heart goes out to President Kelly. In less than a year I know how engrained she has become in this University and with all the students and faculty, who call it home. My thoughts, and I'm sure all of our thoughts are with her today.

Dean Perlman, in spite of all of your obligations, you have never stopped in your pursuit of a more just society. You are a valuable, irreplaceable, resource for the students and faculty who admire you and we are lucky to have you as Dean. Thank you sir.

To the trustees, board, deans, faculty, and whichever poor soul thought I was deserving an honorary degree, thank you. And let me say how honored I am to officially become part of the best alumni network in New England. Now I won't get all those weird looks when I crash those alumni parties in D.C. and Boston, so that's a plus. To your student speaker, Sara, given what Mackenzie just did, I am so grateful that I am your warmup act and not following you. I know you're going to crush it. Congratulations and good luck.

And to the family and friends joining us today, thank you. And I mean that. Thank you. I was in law school once and I know that you've been listening to daily complaints for years. The Class of 2019 would not be here today without you, and I'm sure that they know it. So, please, fellow graduates, please stand and give a warm round of applause to your loved ones behind you because they certainly deserve it. And now, let's return the favor. Class of 2019, congratulations. You guys made it. And you're late for bar review. Congratulations. The worst part about graduating from law school.

Beautiful Boston spring days, supposedly. Missed while you locked yourself in Moakley Law Library. The late nights drinking alone at SideBar after you forgot a legal definition in front of your whole class. Three duck boat tours spent dodging flying beer cans and worshipping sports gods that have blessed Title Town, USA. And one more coming in about 10 day's folks. Brutal karaoke. Riveting kickball and impossible trivial during 1L cup, only to spend your remaining years listening to brags from section C. There you go. I'll never let you live it down. And now, all that stands between you and a diploma is

a ruthless graduation week hangover and me, one of the only Democrats who does not have to rush off to Iowa or New Hampshire. And you guys thought you'd make it home to see Sansa claim the Iron Throne. Hah! Settle in.

Class of 2019, last week I found myself delivering a commencement speech to the students at Lasell College, and the single best piece of advice I could give them was don't go to law school. A little late for all of you. So, I'll spend the next few minutes telling you what I've learned since leaving the seats that you are in today. That starts in a small town in the Dominican Republic where I was a Peace Corp volunteer shortly after graduating from college. I worked with a group of young men who were exploited by international tour companies. They guided tourists up a spectacular set of waterfalls in a remote mountainous rainforest. Together we leveraged a little-used law to put the area under local control. Thereby allowing those guys to earn fair wages and convert this natural resource into an economic engine for local empowerment. Wages went up. The organization made some money. The environment was better protected. The community benefited. All because of the power of the law.

Barely a mile away, a community of Haitian sugar cane workers was almost entirely outside the law's protection. They lived in barns, a family to a stall. No reliable electricity, running water, or sanitation. Daily life was a struggle despite laws written to prohibit such exploitation. I was stunned. Yet, some of the very same Dominicans who welcomed me, cared for me, showed little sympathy. There's no racism here they insisted. If those laws didn't protect them that was their fault. How could that be? How could laws be ignored so blatantly by good people, an obvious service of racial bias and economic exploitation without consequences? These questions left unanswered are a big part of how I ended up in law school. I didn't find a whole lot of answers in my 1L classes either. Now, now. But a legal aid clinic helped slow the gap between the laws in the books and the practice in a courtroom. I spent much of my last two years helping tenants who were being evicted when a landlord defaulted on a mortgage. It was the height of the foreclosure crisis, when bankers should have known better, teaser rates spiked, homeowners went bankrupt. Renter's homes turned to ruins. And working families were left trying to piece their lives together.

A few moments in Boston Housing Court was quite an education. Case after case, family after family, ruling after ruling, default judgment after default judgment. Lives upended. Dreams deferred. And their questions unanswered. The families we helped were subject to the very same laws that lay beyond the reach of those we didn't. What separated who came through a system with a fairer outcome and those who didn't was simply the presence of a lawyer.

After graduating I became an assistant district attorney where all of that law that you spent studying becomes real, real quick. And you learn an awful lot of what they don't teach you in law school. About kids breaking into cars and homes to grab valuables and turn them into quick cash to satiate an opioid addiction. About a homeless vet, arrested for disturbing the peace, his underlying offense was mental illness and no place to go. About the old, the sick, the isolated, the infirm, the different who are too vulnerable to

testify and thus, a perfect victim. About people like Jimmy. One day in the Falmouth District Court, buried in a mountain of cases, my ear caught the judge addressing a defendant by name during his arraignment. How are you? What are you doing here? Are you sure this is what you want to do? I looked at a supervisor and she pulled me aside. Jimmy was well known around town. He was harmless. He was homeless. He had a lengthy record of petty offenses. It was starting to get cold and he needed a place to stay. So, he would go out, steal something, get arrested, arraigned, receive a bail warning not to commit another offense. Then he would go do it again, in the hopes, in the hopes of getting his bail revoked, spending the winter behind bars with a roof over his head and three meals a day.

What an indictment of today's America. What a judgment. The laws that we have written, the protections selectively enforced. Systemic inequities allowed to persist. [It] motivated me to try to run for Congress where representatives are supposed to be able to try to rebalance the scales to hear every American voice. It didn't take long to learn that those skills weren't limited, weren't tilted rather by voices, but power. It isn't often a Jimmy's standing at my door telling me what our system could have done or still could do to ease his burden. Someone with resources, with time, expendable energy to organize materials, leverage statistics and studies, travel to Washington and make their case. It has been yet another reminder of a wearying disparity between those with access to power and therefore, access to the law and all of its protections, and those who can't or who are too tired, too exhausted, too worn out to do so.

Class of 2019, this is the system you inherit. It is a system in dire need of an upgrade, of bright ideas, of bold thinking, of a generation that believes that our practice of law can one day, with enough effort and sweat and tears bring about that perfect union. And since that day you stepped foot into Suffolk Law you have not asked for permission or waited for validation of a diploma to do your part. Suffolk Law students have already contributed more than 32,000 hours of free legal service to your neighbors. Neighbors facing eviction and racism, claiming asylum, fleeing domestic violence, and asking for justice when wrongfully accused.

Students like Justin Rhuda who spent two years fighting ISIS in Iraq and Syria only to return to the United States, enroll in law school and work pro bono for Veterans Legal Service. He's already saved the little roof over the head of one former U.S. prisoner of war, his family teetering on the precipice of homelessness.

Students like Kelly Vieira who refused to be told what she could and couldn't become. She was a champion in the school's Women of Color Law Student Association, and will stand as a beacon of hope and justice in our Commonwealth's courtrooms as an assistant district attorney.

Students who rushed into the Marshall-Brennan Program to coach students in Boston's public schools about what the law means, how it's enforced, and why it matters. Students who have fought housing discrimination and brought enforcement actions

against landlords and companies who denied a home to someone because of their race, disability, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

Graduates, the last thing in the world you need is my advice. You didn't take out all those student loans to have a member of Congress tell you that our nation's pursuit of justice has not been perfect. But instead, I leave you with a challenge. Use your knowledge. Use that passion to demand that laws empower rather than exclude. Because today, today, our law becomes your vocation, your calling, your career, and your life. And you become its heart. Today the legal system that you have studied can no longer be kept at arm's length. It is comprised of you and of me, of the graduates to your left and right, lawyers, activists, and advocates that have dedicated their lives to ensure its continued evolution and expansion.

And now, it is your turn. You must advocate for it. You must shield it. You must strengthen it. You must enable it for those beyond its touch. Be aware of this system that you inherit, with all of its strengths and failures. Be respectful of a field to which you have dedicated your lives. Be humble enough to know that you will practice the law, you will not perfect it, and bold enough to try anyway. Find your own version of Jimmy and do not forget him.

Class of 2019, this country needs you. I know you will not let her down. Congratulations to each and every one of you.