I am thrilled to welcome you to Seton Hall Law School. I thank Dean Boozang for the privilege of speaking to you today on the topic of becoming a lawyer. Fifteen years ago, I sat where you are in this very room, somewhat shyly, but eagerly, about to begin my path to becoming a lawyer. (My apologies if any of my former professors in the room just felt a little bit older). The future seemed so full of possibilities at that moment, though, I probably never could have imagined myself speaking to a new generation of future attorneys today.

I have to warn you, I have a lot to tell you about becoming a lawyer because it is a topic I think about nearly every day. As a clinical professor who supervises students representing low-income and disadvantaged clients in the Center for Social Justice, I have the good fortune every semester to witness first-hand a formative part of this process for many students.

The process of becoming a lawyer and what it means to be a lawyer, can take many forms. I’d like to share some observations drawn from my experiences, including those I have shared with my students.

First, becoming a lawyer and being a lawyer is not a solitary endeavor. In fact, being a lawyer is in many ways a continuous series of collaborations—you’ll likely collaborate with colleagues, supervising partners, co-counsel, and maybe, amici, experts, investigators, paralegals and even community partners. Whether you are a public interest lawyer like me, or engaged in solo practice, government service, or serve as in-house counsel, embrace collaboration because you will likely be a member of many lawyering teams, and a better lawyer because of it.

It makes sense then that the process of becoming a lawyer is also not limited to the effort of one person. Sure, you will drive this process with your commitment, intellect, and hard work.
But there are many people who will influence your development as a lawyer in a dynamic, even if unwitting, collaboration. Some of the chief collaborators in this project might be obvious: your professors, classmates, and even loved ones. Today, I’ll focus on an additional contributor to your development as an attorney: your clients.

Only a clinical professor would tell you that it is never too early to start thinking about your clients, even on the first day of law school. (I know you don’t have any clients yet—for those of you who came in late this morning, don’t worry, you didn’t miss something important). Beginning today start thinking about your future clients: the individuals and entities who will one day count on you and look to you for advice—for whom you will make a difference. Your clients have much to teach you about becoming and being a lawyer. I’d like to tell you about three essential lessons I have learned from my clients: the importance of resiliency, empathy, and humility in a lawyer’s work.

First, Resiliency. Over the years in the Clinic, students and I have represented many trafficking survivors and other migrant women who fled domestic violence, female genital mutilation, and forced marriage, after their own governments dismissed this gender-based persecution as private matters, beyond the concern of law. It never ceases to amaze me how so many of my clients, undeterred, were willing to risk their lives, safety, and membership in their communities to stand up to oppression. Take for example, the young woman from Mali who was our client for many years. She sought asylum in the United States after refusing to submit to a forced marriage in her home country. At first her courage might seem surprising. This client’s father isolated her from the world. He and the other men in her community taught her at a young age that women cannot speak for themselves, and that her father and her brothers would make all decisions about her life, until they transferred that power to her husband. And yet, in spite of that
overwhelming effort to render her powerless, she refused to accept her father’s mandate that she marry someone against her will. She refused to accept the rape that would be inherent in her forced marriage, and sanctioned by the law in Mali. She refused to accept a lifetime without basic freedom and dignity.

When violence and oppression throughout the world is overwhelming and it seems as if the world will never change, I am continually inspired by my clients’ irrepressible courage. They have publicly revealed horrible and humiliating crimes perpetrated against them in order to obtain safety for their children, to hold their assailants accountable, and slowly to change the world. My clients are powerful and they have shown me what it means to be resilient.

Good lawyers also need resilience—though admittedly in a form far less courageous. Sometimes as a lawyer you will not succeed at first or at all. The law might not favor your client’s position. Or perhaps society is not yet ready to change. Lawyers must keep going. They must adapt and generate new ideas in pursuit of justice.

Two of the most meaningful victories the Clinic secured for our clients (including asylum for our client from Mali), took more than seven years of litigation, multiple hearings, numerous briefs, several different teams of talented attorneys and law students, varied strategies, and even changes to the law, to finally win. But relentless lawyering is a lesson that comes with hard losses too.

Our clinic recently lost a big case impacting thousands of poor immigrants in the State. Naturally, I felt discouraged thinking about the impact on our sick and vulnerable clients. A wise mentor and co-counsel reminded me, through his reflexive response to the loss, that great lawyers never give up in the face of defeat—even when you’ve seemingly exhausted viable appeals. He
reminded me that if the law stands in the way of justice, come up with a long-term strategy to change it; think beyond litigation and to other avenues of reform.

That kind of resiliency and relentless drive will serve you well as attorneys, and it something to strive for even as law students today. I am confident that you will love your experience at Seton Hall Law School like I did. But undoubtedly, there will be times when each of you will feel the pressure of a difficult and unfamiliar task or the intensity of this transformative experience. That’s normal. When you feel that pressure, see your own resilience as a skill to cultivate because it is the mark of a great lawyer. Reach out to others, including your professors and classmates for support, and maybe rethink a strategy for success. But then put your head down and press on, confident in your own resiliency.

Empathy. My clients have also taught me about the importance of empathetic understanding in a profession that comes face to face with society’s most intractable problems and also with clients’ most precious individual concerns. People sometimes confuse the word empathy with pity, but the two are not the same. Empathy carries with it an ability to understand another’s problem or feelings, even when you have not shared the same experiences.

I believe each of you in this room is naturally empathetic. Many of you have demonstrated it through service which led you to this moment today. But, in truth, each of us encounters barriers to empathetic understanding and lawyers must overcome those barriers in order to serve our clients effectively.

For example, the students and I represent clients who are prisoners at a county jail. We advocate to improve conditions at the jail, including our clients’ medical care. When we meet with our clients for the first time each semester, I am always curious to hear the new students’ impressions. For many, it is their first time within the intimidating concrete walls of a correctional
institution and shaking hands with a stranger accused of a crime. After a first meeting, students frequently tell me how surprised they are that our clients seem just like “regular people” who are polite and appreciative of our efforts to make the jail a better place. This is not what many students expect from clients accused of crimes.

And yet other students in the clinic have had loved ones who are incarcerated. Those students know better than anyone that in spite of their mistakes, our clients are, of course, people. They love their families, worry about their health, and appreciate when someone treats them with respect. But for a moment at the start of the clinic, the criminal justice system—and inevitably factors like race and poverty that intersect with that system in powerful ways—stand as potential barriers to understanding and, ultimately, to good lawyering.

Fortunately, just as often as I see such barriers, I see inspiring students from this law school knock these barriers down. The significance of meeting a person who needs your help transforms students into immediate advocates. They fly into action, figuring out how to secure a diabetic client’s medication or how to investigate a correctional officers’ excessive use of force.

But it requires work. To be an effective advocate, lawyers must think critically about how our own backgrounds and life experiences have shaped our views and expectations of the world. It is essential in order to communicate effectively with and understand clients who may or may not share those same experiences. I’m not suggesting this is easy or that I can teach you how to do this today. When I was a law student it felt daunting to navigate what seemed like an enormous gulf between my own experiences and those of my very first clients. What would I say to a mentally ill client in New York City afraid of losing his subsidized housing but struggling to take the steps he needed to prevent that from happening? How could I understand the fear experienced by a gay client at risk of being returned to and killed in Sudan because of his sexual orientation?
Within these first few weeks of law school you can commit yourself to being the kind of lawyer who works hard to overcome barriers to empathetic understanding. You will begin to engage in class discussions and hear many perspectives different than your own, all informed by the unique backgrounds and experiences of each of you in this room. Sometimes in this process, you might be unsure of your own voice, and perhaps even, if you belong here. An impressive law student who graduated last spring stated at the end of the year that she felt ambivalence when talking about justice during law school because she questioned whether there was a place for her as a lawyer in a legal system plagued by racial injustice. I have heard other students describe moments when they felt alienated in class, hearing views expressed by classmates that were divorced from their own experiences or sense of truth.

Starting today, build upon this law school’s supportive and nurturing community by making sure everyone in this room knows that you are each essential—essential to a profession that needs a multitude of perspectives and smart, committed lawyers from all backgrounds in order to best challenge injustice and change the legal system and world for the better. Listen and learn from one another. Understanding doesn’t mean, however, that another’s opinion or perspective will necessarily change your mind; in fact, hearing from someone else, can sometimes reaffirm what you stand for. But your engagement with one another and with the law will be deeper and you will set yourself on a path to being a lawyer capable of understanding, if you commit yourself to this today.

**Finally, Humility.**

Humility may not be a characteristic most of you think of when it comes to lawyers. We probably all know lawyers, who, true-to-type, enjoy the sound of their own voice. (In fact, you might be thinking that about me at this very moment. So let me assure you, I’m nearly finished.)
Lawyers can do great things, but great lawyers don’t see themselves as heroes and never think the status of being a lawyer alone entitles them to any special deference that isn’t earned.

And so a final story about humility learned from the experience of one of my clients. The clinic represents, along with our co-counsel, the amazing law firm Gibbons P.C., a client who is on death row in Alabama. A jury convicted and sentenced our client to death nearly twenty years ago. We are now fighting for a new trial in part because the lawyer who originally represented our client never presented any evidence or argument from which the jury could fulfill its duty to consider whether our client’s character, record, or any other mitigating circumstance weighed against a death sentence. In short, he failed to make a case for life.

To be clear, this is not a case where the attorney made a judgment call not to present such evidence, predicting that it might do more harm than good. The lawyer simply didn’t know about an overwhelming amount of mitigating evidence which would have provided the jury with critical perspective in weighing an appropriate sentence: the physical abuse our client suffered and witnessed as a child; his family members’ substance abuse and alcoholism, to which he was exposed at a young age; the deep poverty and neglect he experienced at a young child; his intellectual disability; and the harsh conditions and sexual abuse he experienced in juvenile detention while detained for a minor offense—to name just a few examples. The attorney did not know about any of this because he never talked to our client about his family and background, he never collected any records, and he never interviewed more than a dozen family member and other witnesses who were willing to provide this information and testify in our client’s case.

I’m not here to argue our case to you. (Though I admit it, now that I’m getting going, I’m certainly tempted). My point for you is different. I want you to think for a moment about how the status of being an attorney, dangerously empowered our client’s trial counsel to speak about
matters affecting his client’s life or death, even though, in reality, the attorney failed in his most basic and fundamental obligations. Being an attorney should be a humbling responsibility. Some lawyers do heroic work, but unfortunately far too many also do great damage. Damage to their clients’ lives and to the law.

Humility is an asset because it will lead you to admit mistakes, know when you’re in over your head and need help, or when you simply need to work harder. The best attorneys that I know, including my talented colleagues in the Center for Social Justice, have great stores of humility. If the case is open and shut, they think they are probably missing something. Sometimes they agonize about a judgment call, not because they don’t have confidence in their decisions, but because they are not satisfied until they convince themselves that they’ve got it right.

Think about humility as you begin your path as a lawyer. When you are preparing for class and think that a properly decided case does not warrant much debate, re-read the dissent and ask yourself whether you have overlooked its complexity. If you are done two weeks earlier than your classmates preparing for an exam, you might pat yourself on the back for being so sharp, or humility might encourage you to take another look and discover something you are missing.

In closing, just as when I sat where you are during my orientation, you simply can’t know at this moment where your path to becoming a lawyer will lead you fifteen years from now or beyond—though I imagine many of you have exciting and promising ideas. I am certain, however, that whatever path you pursue in the future, you will never regret the decision to become a lawyer and the decision to learn how to be a lawyer at this law school. You have chosen a meaningful and gratifying profession that will enable you to use your intellect to shape the answers to some of the most difficult questions of our time, to improve the lives of others, and to change the world in countless ways. Because you have chosen this special place as the starting point for your great
futures, I have no doubt you will do so with resiliency, empathy and humility—that is, with an integrity that defines the graduates of Seton Hall Law School.