

Henna, thank you for that lovely and kind introduction.

Good morning, Dean Weich, members of the faculty and administration, alumni, families, friends, and of course, the graduating class of Seton Hall Law School.

And thank you for inviting me to be part of such an important day in your lives.

When I learned the class chose me to give this commencement address, I was incredibly honored. Also slightly panicked. Because unlike cross examination, there are no objections here, no sidebars, and no colleagues to save me if this completely falls apart.

But honestly, standing here today means a great deal to me because I know what this moment represents.

Not just achievement.

Sacrifice.

Because we are gathered here just after Memorial Day, I have been thinking about that word a lot over the last few days.

This weekend, we honored men and women who sacrificed their lives in service to this country. And while today is absolutely a celebration, I also think commencement is a moment to recognize the quieter sacrifices that brought each of you into this room.

The parents who worked extra shifts.

The spouses, partners, grandparents, siblings, and friends who carried you through stressful moments, difficult semesters, and probably more phone calls about finals than they ever wanted.

The people who helped get you here.

The people who encouraged you after a bad grade, a rejection, or a moment where you quietly wondered whether you belonged here at all.

None of us gets here alone.

And I know that personally.

I am the proud daughter of immigrant parents. My mother left Cuba at 20 years old fleeing communism and leaving behind everything she had ever known. My father came to this country from Colombia on a student visa with almost nothing except ambition, discipline, and an incredible work ethic.

They built a life here through sacrifice.

My sister became a doctor. I became a lawyer.

And honestly, as daughters of immigrants, those were basically the only two approved options in our household. Doctor or lawyer. Pick one. Our parents ended up with one of each.

I grew up watching my parents work incredibly hard so my sister and I could have opportunities they never had. And when you grow up watching sacrifice that closely, you understand something early: nothing meaningful comes easy.

That lesson has stayed with me my entire life.

I also want to tell you something I wish someone had told me when I was sitting where you are now.

Do not be afraid to ask.

Some of the most important moments in my career happened because I was willing to risk being uncomfortable, awkward, or rejected.

When I was younger, I became fascinated by trial lawyers. I remember watching one of the first televised trials when I was in sixth grade: *The People v. O.J. Simpson*. I was captivated by the lawyering. Watching the prosecution and defense engage in this live chess match completely pulled me in. At the time, I never could have imagined that nearly 30 years later, parts of my own career and life would echo that trial in so many ways.

One of those lawyers was Robert Shapiro.

Years later, when I was in college, I was helping organize a student conference, and my mother suggested that I try inviting Robert Shapiro to speak.

Now, I had absolutely no business calling Robert Shapiro.

I didn't know him.

I had no connections to him.

I was just a student with a phone and probably an unreasonable amount of confidence.

And I remember being nervous even making the call because I kept thinking: why would someone like that say yes to someone like me?

My mother gave me very simple advice. She said: "Just ask. The worst thing he can say is no."

So I called.

And to my complete shock, he said yes.

That one phone call turned into a mentorship and eventually a friendship that has lasted years.

I think about that moment often because it taught me something incredibly important: people cannot support you, mentor you, guide you, or champion you if you are too afraid to put yourself out there.

You have to ask.

You have to introduce yourself.

You have to risk hearing no.

And along the way, you also learn something else: mentors and champions are not always the same people.

Some mentors teach you how to become a better lawyer. Others challenge you, push you, or completely change the way you think.

Champions are different. Champions are the people who mention your name in rooms you are not in yet. The people who advocate for you when opportunities arise. The people who help open doors.

And over the course of your career, you will need **both**.

You will need people who teach you how to become a better lawyer.

And you will need people who believe in your potential before you fully believe in it yourself.

So seek those people out.

And when your time comes, become that person for someone else.

Now, I originally thought I wanted to become a doctor because I wanted to help people. Then I realized medicine involved blood, needles, chemistry, advanced math, and frankly a level of science aptitude I did not possess. Which, in hindsight, was probably better for everyone involved since I still cry when I have to get a shot and will absolutely faint at the sight of blood.

But eventually I realized what I actually wanted was not medicine. I wanted purpose. I wanted service. I wanted to help people through some of the hardest moments of their lives.

And that is exactly what I found in the law.

This profession, at its core, is a service profession.

Yes, it is intellectually demanding. Yes, it is competitive. Yes, some of you are going to bill more hours than you currently think is humanly possible.

But at its best, this profession is about helping people who are overwhelmed, scared, embarrassed, angry, uncertain, or completely out of options.

Sometimes your client is a major corporation.

Sometimes it is one person whose entire life is quietly falling apart.

Either way, they are trusting you with something enormously important.

Their business, their reputation, their family, sometimes even their freedom or future.

One of the things I love most about being a lawyer is that it forces you to really see people.

Your clients.

Your colleagues.

Judges.

Jurors.

Even opposing counsel occasionally... although sometimes that requires a little more effort than others.

But truly, one of the things you learn over time is that civility matters in this profession. Your reputation follows you, and so does the way you treat people. You can be a fierce advocate without being disrespectful. Some of the best lawyers I know are incredibly tough in the courtroom and perfectly civil outside of it.

And the longer you practice, the more you realize this is a very small profession. The opposing counsel you battle with today may be your co-counsel, referral source, or even your client tomorrow. So protect your credibility, protect your professionalism, and do not confuse hostility with strength.

And that humanity matters now more than ever because we are living in a world that feels increasingly fast, distracted, performative, and reactive.

A world where people speak before listening.

Where outrage travels faster than truth.

Where everyone wants to be heard, but very few people actually stop long enough to hear someone else.

The law forces us to slow down, listen carefully, think critically, separate facts from noise, and advocate responsibly even when emotions are running high.

That is an enormous responsibility.

But it is also an extraordinary privilege.

And because this is a service profession, I also want to encourage you to give back throughout your career.

Do pro bono work.

Not because it looks good on a résumé.

Not because your firm tells you to.

Do it because it reminds you why many of us wanted to become lawyers in the first place.

Some of the most meaningful moments in my career have not come from the biggest cases or the most public victories. They came from helping someone who otherwise would not have had access to legal representation at all.

And early in your career, pro bono work will teach you faster than almost anything else.

You will get real courtroom experience, learn how to speak to clients, think on your feet, and take responsibility much earlier than you otherwise might.

And you will realize something important: achievement by itself is not enough.

The title, the office, the compensation — none of it is enough on its own.

You can have all the external markers of success and still feel deeply unhappy and disconnected from your work. I have seen enough now to know that.

People want meaning.

They want purpose and fulfillment.

They want to feel useful.

And this profession gives you the rare opportunity to genuinely change another person's life.

Never lose sight of that.

One of the things I have learned over the course of my career is that there is a reason we call it the practice of law.

The practice.

Not the perfection of law.

Not the mastery of law.

The practice.

Because no matter how experienced you become, you are always learning.

Every client, every judge, every trial teaches you something if you are paying attention.

And sometimes your losses teach you more than your victories ever will.

I lost my first trial.

I still remember sitting in my car afterward replaying every mistake in my head. Every objection. Every argument. Every moment I thought I could have handled differently.

And I remember thinking very clearly: **maybe I'm not good at this. Maybe I don't belong here.**

Then the next morning I got up and went back to work.

Which, as it turns out, is most of being a lawyer.

This profession will humble you.

There will be nights where you leave the office at 2 a.m. wondering how it is somehow already tomorrow.

There will be vacations where the first thing you pack is your laptop.

There will be setbacks, sacrifices, and moments where you genuinely question yourself.

And despite what social media currently suggests, there is no shortcut around hard work in this profession.

None.

People often see the visible moments.

People see the trial, the headline, the visible success.

What they do not see are the years beforehand.

The years where nobody knows your name.

The years where you are doing document review on weekends.

The years where you are exhausted and trying to prove yourself.

The years where you quietly wonder whether all the hard work is ever actually going to lead anywhere.

That part matters.

Because success rarely arrives all at once. It is usually built quietly, repeatedly, and often invisibly.

I believe deeply in what I call earned luck.

Of course luck matters. Timing matters. Opportunity matters.

But earned luck is different.

Earned luck is when preparation meets opportunity.

Earned luck is putting yourself in a position where, when the opportunity finally appears, you are actually ready for it.

And I have found that the people who consistently rise in this profession are usually not the people looking for shortcuts.

They are the people willing to outwork everyone else.

Yes, talent matters.

But effort counts twice.

Preparation matters.

Discipline matters.

Curiosity matters.

Your reputation matters.

There will always be someone smarter than you.

Someone wealthier than you.

Someone with better connections than you.

You cannot control any of that.

You can control your preparation, your work ethic, your integrity, and the kind of reputation you build over time.

And those things matter enormously over the course of a career.

Your reputation will walk into every room before you do.

Protect it carefully.

Because credibility takes years to build and about five minutes to lose.

And here is something else I want to say because I think many of you probably need to hear it right now.

Do not spend your life comparing your path to everyone else's.

Especially in this profession.

Lawyers are competitive by nature. We compare firms, salaries, titles, promotions, clients, credentials, lifestyles.

But one of the ways I have always measured success is this:

If there is no one whose life you would trade for, then you are probably exactly where you are supposed to be.

That does not mean your life is perfect.

It does not mean the work is easy.

It means the life you are building aligns with who you are.

Your values.

Your priorities.

Your definition of happiness.

Build that life intentionally.

Because prestige without fulfillment is a very empty thing.

And while we are talking about fulfillment, let me encourage you to do something else.

Travel.

See the world while you are young enough to do it spontaneously and imperfectly.

Meet people who think differently from you.

Read books outside the law.

Learn history.

Experience different cultures.

Eat really good food.

Stay curious.

A wise and very interesting man once told me: be interested and be interesting.

I love that advice because the best lawyers I know are not just intelligent. They are deeply interested in humanity.

They are observers.

Listeners.

Storytellers.

Students of people.

The law is ultimately about human behavior. The more you understand people, the better lawyer you will become.

And I think one of the greatest dangers for young lawyers is becoming so consumed by work that you stop developing as a person.

Do not let that happen.

Your entire identity cannot become billable hours and email chains.

Go experience life.

Go have adventures.

Go make mistakes.

Go sit in uncomfortable conversations with people who challenge your worldview.

Go learn how the world works outside your own environment.

That perspective will make you not only a better lawyer, but a better human being.

And despite how rapidly the world is changing, I remain optimistic about your generation and your future.

The legal profession needs thoughtful, disciplined, ethical people who are willing to work hard and defend fairness, truth, and institutions even when it is unpopular or difficult.

Because this profession is not about ego.

It is about responsibility.

Responsibility to clients.

Responsibility to the rule of law.

Responsibility to each other.

And now that responsibility belongs to you.

Today is not the end of your education.

It is the beginning.

So today, celebrate.

Celebrate yourselves.

Celebrate your families.

Celebrate the sacrifices that brought you here.

Celebrate the fact that you accomplished something extraordinarily difficult.

Savor this moment because you earned it.

Take the photos.

Go to dinner.

Laugh with your classmates.

Thank the people who helped you get here.

Because years from now, this will still be one of the great days of your life.

And then tomorrow...

Get back to work.

Pass the bar.

Take the job.

Travel.

Fall in love.

Take risks.

Work hard.

Stay humble.

Help people.

Be interested.

Be interesting.

Congratulations, Class of 2026.

Thank you.