

Elaine Rocha – Seton Hall Law Graduation 2026

Board of Visitors Opening Remarks

Good morning, Dean Weich, Faculty, fellow Board Members, Alumni, Distinguished Guests, friends, incredibly proud families, and most importantly, the brilliant graduating Class of 2026!

What a privilege it is to stand here today. As a proud alum and the Outgoing Chair of the Board of Visitors, I have to confess something right away: I walked across this very stage almost 28 years ago to the day. And my first piece of advice to all of you is this: do not blink. Because when you do, time flies so incredibly quickly. It feels like just yesterday I was sitting where you are, filled with the same mix of excitement, nerves, and anticipation.

When I sat where you are today, I thought I was looking at a map. I believed my degree was a GPS with a pre-programmed destination: a law firm, a practice area, a life. Now, to be fair, in 1998 we didn't actually have GPS - we had oversized paper maps that were impossible to fold back up, and we also had a lot of blind faith. But if there is one thing my career has taught me, it's that life isn't a map: it's a terrain. Maps, and even the best GPS, are rigid. They fail the moment the road is closed, the landscape changes, or if you lose a signal. Today, I want to suggest that what you are holding is not a map, but a Master Key.

My own path hasn't been a straight line. It has looked less like a career ladder and more like a scavenger hunt. I began in the practice of law at a traditional law firm, but that same education eventually opened doors into the complex machinery of Corporate America. It granted me access to the high-stakes world of global insurance, investments, and operations. It empowered me to have the confidence to develop an Insurtech start-up with two co-founders, and eventually, it provided the entry point to the mission-driven world of nonprofits where I serve as CEO today.

On paper, these roles look like they belong to four different people. To an outsider, it might look like a series of pivots. But in reality, there was one constant thread: My Seton Hall Law degree was the Master Key that worked in every one of those locks. It gave me the standing to enter the room, and the analytical power to understand the machinery behind the door.

This law school didn't just teach you how to do legal research, to write, or to cite cases. It taught you a universal language of logic, ethics, and strategy. Whether you were in the library or a coffee shop fueled by espresso or matcha, you honed a burning desire to understand the law. You were also learning a powerful new way to analyze, reason, and solve problems. In many ways, you began

speaking a different language than your family and friends, or, as I like to say, you learned how to think differently than “regular” people, also known as non-lawyers.

In the corporate world, I used my legal training to see the risks and opportunities that others missed. In the executive suite, I used the law to build structures where there was chaos. With the insurance start-up, I embraced technology and AI to reimagine an industry, just as technology is reshaping yours right now. And today, in the non-profit world, I use those same tools to advocate for those who don't always have a seat at the table.

You are not just graduating to be "lawyers" in the traditional sense; you are graduating as professional problem-solvers. You are the person in the room who can take a mess of facts and find the path forward. You have been trained in the tradition of servant leadership, meaning your greatest successes will come from the value you provide to others. Whether you are in a courtroom, a boardroom, or a community center, you are now an ethical anchor.

You have faced down academic and personal challenges with a grit and determination that is truly inspiring. Many of you balanced family obligations, personal challenges, and unexpected opportunities - sometimes all at once - while attending classes, reading endless pages of case law, and sharpening the analytical skills that brought you to this moment. And many of your families carried that journey alongside you, supporting you, sacrificing for you, and believing in you even during the hardest moments.

Our motto, "Hazard Zet Forward," reminds us to push through peril and uncertainty with courage. So, my advice is simple: Do not be afraid to use your Master Key to open a door you didn't see on your original map.

If you find a role that calls to you but doesn't involve a billable hour, take it. If you want to build a business instead of a book of business, do it. Your Seton Hall Law education is not a fence designed to keep you inside the legal profession; it is the foundation that allows you to build a skyscraper in any field you choose.

Class of 2026, don't worry about finding the "perfect" path today. Just find the next interesting challenge. You have the intellect. You have the grit. And now, you hold your own Master Key, one that can open doors you cannot even imagine yet. Make us proud. Make yourselves proud. Hazard Zet Forward. Go build something unexpected.

Congratulations, graduates! The future is yours!