

## 2017 Address of Dean Gillian Lester

Thank you, Kai and Janice.

Distinguished guests, families and friends, faculty and administrators, and graduates: It's my great pleasure to welcome you here today to mark the graduation of Columbia Law School's Class of 2017.

Graduates, today we celebrate a milestone that you have been working towards since you began your time at Columbia Law School. And you have worked hard. There have been long days and late nights. But...the day has arrived. And you have earned all of the pomp, circumstance, and celebration that go along with it. Congratulations!

But, as I'm sure you know, this accomplishment is a shared one. I'm looking out at the roughly 5,000 parents, children, family members, friends, and loved ones who flank this stage. These are the people to whom you have turned for support, for encouragement, for guidance. They are here today as they have been with you throughout this journey. All of us owe them our recognition and gratitude.

And, graduates, this is a day on which, even as you look to the future, you may already be feeling nostalgia for what you will leave behind.

You are not alone in feeling nostalgic. Celebrating here with you today are members of the Class of 1967, who, this year, mark the 50th anniversary of their graduation from Columbia Law School.



Class of 1967: We thank you for your 50 years of distinguished contributions to our society, and for your loyalty to Columbia Law School. Please rise, so that we may tip our hats to you!

Graduation addresses often focus on the theme of change. After all, graduation is a time of closure, transition, and new beginnings. Change is inevitable, and the future is full of possibility. What more apt message than an exhortation to seize the day, embrace the new, and find opportunity in what lies ahead?

Well, I believe in all of those things. I believe in being brave and taking risks in new situations, I believe in the power of reinvention, and I believe in a full and spirited embrace of new experiences.

In fact, I once delivered a speech that said all of those things. On September 11, 2014, I gave my first speech to a class at Columbia Law School. That class was the J.D. class that sits before me. The occasion, your 1L Dinner.

But today I don't want to talk about things that will change, or the changes you, yourselves will shape in the years ahead. No. Instead, I want to talk about the things you should try NOT to change—the things you must preserve.

For example, when you came to Columbia, you also made the decision to open yourself to the acquisition of new knowledge. Throughout your time in law school, your core mission has been clear: to learn.

While pursuing that mission, you have become experts in a new way of thinking, one that insists fundamentally on analytic rigor...perhaps to the chagrin of your family members who like to enjoy a nice, ...quiet, holiday meal.

Your teachers, as well as your peers, have given you a more textured and nuanced view of the world. And you've used the opportunity to learn from, and alongside, others with different experiences to develop confidence, and to grow as a person.

But here is what you need to preserve: the curiosity and humility that have enabled you to open your mind in this way. As your personal and professional lives flourish, don't assume that you are done with the period in your life that's devoted to learning. Your education, in many ways, has only just begun.

Here's another thing that mustn't change. Most of you came to law school in pursuit of some goal or



ideal. You believed that legal training would help you do or fix something.

Maybe you wanted to bring justice to a community you care about, or become a great litigator, or work across borders, or fix the tax code, or reenact the final arguments from *My Cousin Vinny*.

Well, now you have the tools to do whatever it was that brought you here in the first place. The problem is that law school likely made you wiser about how hard it may be to accomplish that vision.

So...maybe you need to adjust. Yes, perhaps it's more complicated than you had thought, but that doesn't mean that you should abandon the idealism or inspiration that drove you to study the law. Embrace it. Take it on. Realize the promise of the tools we have given you, and rise to meet the challenge. That's what Columbians do best.

A third change you must guard against: With the degrees you earn today, you become stewards of our most vital institutions. You have a responsibility to protect the rule of law and the core values substantiated in our constitutional order—rights and freedoms that protect equality and expression, due process of law, and the rules of ethics and accountability that preserve trust and stability in civil society.

This will not always be easy. The world is a tumultuous and unpredictable place, and the very foundations of our democratic institutions will sometimes be shaken. But these are precisely the times when society will turn to you most urgently.

This is not an argument against change in the law. It is an argument about the preservation of the integrity of the law. Even as the law evolves to meet the needs of an advancing society, you must safeguard its legitimacy and the fairness of its application.

Finally, finally. Cherish and preserve the relationships you've formed here at Columbia Law School. In the time you've been here, you've made friends among classmates, professors, and staff members. They have stood beside you, cheering you on and supporting you at every juncture. Don't let the passage of time sever these bonds. These friendships—the ones you form in law school—will be the ones that sustain you for the rest of your life.

In fact, as some of you may know, this year's Reese teaching prize honoree is someone that I met in law school. Twenty-four years and two children later, I couldn't be more proud to share the stage with him today.

Now, I know that I said I didn't want to talk about the things that will change. But let me leave you with this: Preserving these essential elements of your time at Columbia Law School—your commitment to learning, your guiding vision, your professional obligations, and your solid friendships. These are the things that will anchor you as you navigate the changes that lie ahead.

Class of 2017, on behalf of all of us here at Columbia Law School, I salute you and I wish you the best of all things in the years to come.

