



**Remarks of Pablo E. Zevallos '19, J.D. Class Speaker**  
**Columbia Law Graduation**  
**Monday, May 20, 2019**

Hello, Class of 2019!

There are so many people to thank for making this day possible. First, I'd like to thank the folks in the Facilities Department who built this stage and made sure that Jerome Greene Hall was a clean and safe and clean place for us to study in every single day. I'd also like to thank professors, administrators, staff, and all those whose work, seen and unseen, made this day possible. Let's give a round of applause to them.

The last three years were a singular time to be in law school. It started off as you might expect: the August sun beaming on us during the orientation events on Revson Plaza, the nervous anticipation as we sat through welcoming remarks, the brief exchange of phones to facilitate Facebook friend requests—maybe even a bombed Legal Methods cold call. We envisioned a 1L year spent finding our footing and yearning to fulfill the sense of mission that brought us here in the first place.

Yet, on one November night during 1L fall, uncertainty became tumult. We were bitterly reminded that the question of who gets to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship—the bedrock of our democracy and the legal system we aspire to join—remains deeply unsettled.

And as we looked at the outside world, we looked inward. We questioned what it means, as lawyers, to uphold the rule of law when allegations of breathtaking wrongdoing permeate the highest levels of our politics while young people awaiting trial languish on Rikers Island because they cannot make bail. We listened as many—including members of our own community—stood up and declared, “Me too.” All throughout, there were some who learned harsh realities they never thought they needed to know, while there were others whose voices were finally being heard, and even those who felt as though they no longer had to bear their suffering in silence.

But amid the hurt and the chaos, fellow graduates, we rose to the occasion. In our midst, Class of 2019, are people who went as far as the southern border to help secure asylum for migrants, including families who had been separated from their children. People who were sick of mass shootings and helped lead the largest march against gun violence this state has ever seen. People who enforced the rights of low-wage workers and helped secure justice for survivors of domestic violence. People who successfully defended low-income people from unjust prosecutions and sentences. People who testified in statehouses in support of key legislation.

People who have produced scholarship on new theories to hold government at all levels accountable for our constitutional rights. And people who were tired of the barriers facing women in politics and founded an annual conference to encourage women at Columbia to run for office.

I watched us channel that same vigor and generosity of spirit that we had when facing the outside world right here in our law school community, whether by sending someone notes when they missed a day of class; listening patiently and offering sage advice to a friend contemplating a major life decision; bucking up a classmate whose client faced long odds in a looming court date; and advocating on behalf of improved career support in every sector for future students.

This is who we are. This is the class I am so proud to be a part of. This is the class that I have seen the last three years: durable in our compassion, relentless in our advocacy, devoted in our commitment to justice, and I cannot wait to see what we do when we set loose this spirit upon the legal world.

Fellow graduates, regardless of where the next few years lead us, through pro bono and bar committees, advocacy, and perhaps our full-time work, each of us can fulfill the role that Justice Brandeis prescribed for us over a hundred years ago: to be “the people’s lawyer.” And as we take part in that work, we will face an age-old question: Should we fight mainly to secure the victories at hand, or should we be unyielding in pursuit of a world free from any trace of inequity and injustice?

Although I don’t propose to resolve that question tonight, I can’t help but think of what others before us who faced those same challenges in their own lives—between fighting to make it through the here and now and fighting for a future worthy of their highest aspirations.

And for me, I think about my parents. My mom and dad came to this country from Ecuador in the 1980s. One of Dad’s first jobs was at the Grand Hyatt back when it was owned by a certain developer with a Fifth Avenue tower that bears his name. And my mom fled the first place she lived in after she got here with nothing but the clothes on her back.

My parents would eventually find steady work, claw their way to middle management, meet, and marry. But even as they found stability and started a family, they’d still make endless sacrifices, all in the hope that my little sister and I would never have to hold back from dreaming. Now I get to graduate from Columbia Law School and stand before you tonight.

My family’s story charts a course for all of us. In short order, we’ll get to work with the world as it is, mending the damage of the last few years and making our institutions whole.

But one day, long after this stage is broken down and the gowns get put away, and the diplomas gather dust on office walls, our communities will live in a world where their inherent dignity is affirmed, where people have the freedom and the resources to more fully be the authors of their own destinies. This future may not belong to us, but it is one we doubtless will help shape.

That, fellow graduates, is our charge. Rooted in our history, grounded by humility, but unshackled from a poverty of imagination, we press forward, always holding close the poet's words, that "some work of noble note may yet be done."

Class of 2019, thank you, and Godspeed.