

**Remarks of David Taylor Dayton Jr. '21 LL.M.
LL.M. Class Speaker
Columbia Law School Graduation
Thursday, April 29, 2021**

Thank you, Lune, for that kind introduction. I am truly honored to stand here today representing the nearly 200 LL.M. graduates from 47 countries who have faced—and successfully overcome—the challenges of this unusual year. It is thrilling to have finally reached this momentous day and receive a law degree from this hallowed university.

Whether due to personal circumstances, government policies, or the pandemic, which has become so inseparably intertwined with our law school experience, I imagine all of us have experienced moments during the year where we could not fathom getting to this point.

But for most of us, if we look back even further, you can probably remember moments where your younger selves could never have guessed that you'd be blessed with an opportunity to study and earn a degree from this prestigious institution. Perhaps you faced discrimination; an educational deficit; economic, political, or familial limitations. And if those obstacles were not enough, you may have doubted your true potential. It is likely that we all would not be here today if not for someone who pushed us past those struggles and saw in us something more than we saw in ourselves.

Shortly after graduating with my juris doctor, without a job and facing an exceptional economic downturn, I took my young family to another state so that I could pursue an unpaid internship with the hopes that it might lead to a job. I worked nights stocking shelves at Walmart, interning during the day. It was one of the most stressful periods in my life. There were many nights as I worked in the freezer section that I struggled to imagine having enough money to take care of my family. In those moments, if you would have told me I would someday be able to attend Columbia Law School and earn my LL.M. degree, I would have laughed in your face. But during that time, and many times since, someone did believe in me. Despite the pressures of being a mother of two little ones and facing uncomfortable deprivation, my wife Heather saw in me a potential that I did not see in myself. She encouraged me daily to keep pressing on and believed that if I did, I would someday succeed. Without her, I would not be here today.

My message today is one of gratitude. Yes, we faced a number of struggles this year, as we have throughout our lives. But there are people who have stood behind us and pushed us to succeed both before and during this year. For me, it was my sweet Heather. For others it may have been a

teacher or a friend. As we take the next step forward in our careers and our lives, may we always remember the parent who went without sleep, the teachers who encouraged us, and the love that pushed a young wife to help a young husband believe in himself.

In this year, I have seen our class connect and support each other in New York City and around the world. My first introduction to my LL.M. classmates was through a Facebook group and WhatsApp chat months before school started. I felt an instant connection with people I had never met as we discussed the excitement, trepidation, and logistics of potentially going to law school during a worldwide pandemic. Over the coming months and with the start of school, these acquaintances turned into friends. Those who arrived in New York earlier to study in person were quick to give advice on how to quarantine and to set up social-distancing appropriate meet-ups once the quarantine period ended. The chat became the center for addressing the minutiae of navigating this new world and branched into sub-chats for sports, food, classes, and the always agreeable domain of politics.

That support and guidance came from students who continued to care for each other throughout our year together. By being a part of the chat, I learned that not only do we have amazing photographers, musicians, and writers among us, but, above all, we have amazing people. In remembering our law school experience, may we not just focus on what we missed out on but, more importantly, focus on what we gained and learned by facing this adversity together.

With that gratitude in our hearts, it is now our time to support others as they chase their dreams. It is likely that most of us will have doors opened because of our time here and our degree from this university. May we be willing to not rush in but stand and hold open those doors for others who have not yet been so fortunate. Although our focus now shifts to putting our knowledge and education to use, may we not do so in selfishness but with a strong desire to help others. It should be easy for us to do this with so many Columbia Law School alumni around the world who stand as stalwart examples of this selfless service.

We must understand the importance of our connection to this institution. May we be ethical and trustworthy as we facilitate and take part in the important work that lies ahead. You now have Columbia attached to not just your résumé but indelibly connected to your identity. May you represent the school and yourselves the best that you can. I congratulate you and am so grateful to be a part of such a special class in such a special year. Thank you.