

**Remarks of Andrew Yang '99
Keynote Address
Columbia Law School Graduation
Monday, May 16, 2022**

Thank you. Hello, Columbia! It's great to be back. I graduated from Columbia 24 years ago. My wife is actually in the crowd. We met not that far from here. Evelyn, I love you so much. Give her a round of applause, if you can find her. I'm a parent. I've been to graduations that weren't that big a deal. I've attended a pre-K graduation, as one example. This one is meaningful. I still remember when I was in your shoes, and I'm told that one of the reasons I'm here tonight is due to student voting. So thank you for that. It's the first election I've ever won. [Laughter and applause.] I did win the Iowa Youth Straw Poll, though, in 2020. So if they cut off the voting at age 18, I'd be your president today. [Laughter.]

Now, you're getting addressed as lawyers, but I want to say you're not quite lawyers yet. You know what I mean? I remember the timeline. So right now, you all are among the most talented intellectual products that our country has. Certainly many of you will become attorneys. Among the people I graduated from law school with, there were entrepreneurs, professors, advisers to the good president. [Laughter.] Some others became layabouts, but we don't talk about them so much. When I was in your shoes, I spent the summer you're about to enter studying for the bar, which you will all pass, I'm happy to say—stress not—joined a law firm here in New York, Davis Polk & Wardwell. Was there for five months, as my introducer said. And then—the thing is, you knew this when you invited me to speak, so, I was like, you know, I'm not going to obfuscate—like everyone knows, I was in the law very briefly. So I went from unhappy law firm associate—and I do think that there should be a ceremony when someone decides to leave BigLaw. We should all come together and have a ritual and celebrate their departure. [Laughter.] At least one law firm invited me in to encourage attrition during a recession. It was actually really funny. They were like, “Hey, you want to talk to our associates and tell them it's better on the outside?”

So I went from unhappy law firm associate to failed entrepreneur pretty quickly. I started a dotcom in the first bubble and then worked for another startup that ran out of money and another one after that. On the side during this period, I started throwing parties—it turns out Asians like to party—and teaching test prep. I know, I know. This is an unusual path. You could call it unconventional. You could even join my parents and call it unwise. [Laughter.] My parents told their friends I was still a lawyer for years. And during this time, I will say, I did not socialize that much with my peers from law school because I was self-conscious about the fact that I wasn't making much money, and my peers who were embedded in firms still were doing quite well.

Now, I stuck with this path, and years later, I became CEO of that education company, and I grew to become number one in the U.S. and was bought by a public company when I was 34 years old. Around this time, my parents started being proud of me again. I started talking to my classmates again. I then spent six years training young entrepreneurs as a CEO of a nonprofit I started called Venture for America. I was honored by the Obama administration a couple of times. Got to introduce Evelyn to the president, so my in-laws were excited about me for about a week.

I can tell you the Obama story, too. So we're walking from the Map Room to, you know, it's like another chamber. And I'm here, and President Obama is here, and I'm like, "When am I going to have a chance like this again?" So I go to him, I put my hand on his shoulder. There are Secret Service everywhere. I put my hand on his shoulder and say, "President Obama, I'd like to introduce you to my wife, Evelyn." So he then turns around and, I kid you not, he turns on the high beams. It's like his amusement of the day. He was like, hello, leaned in on her . . . the whole thing. So, good times. [Laughter.] Again, the good president.

But we all know I'm not here today because I was the CEO of Manhattan Prep or even the CEO of Venture for America. I'm here primarily because I ran for president of the United States. [Applause.] And if you were to track down my classmates from Columbia, they would tell you that I would be among the last people that they thought would do something political or public. You know those people that just got announced as prize winners? That was not me in law school. I was a good student, but I wasn't particularly social or altruistic. I ran for president because after Trump won in 2016—and you all remember that night well—I was like, wow, things are really going badly. And I thought I should do something to help. So I told my friends and family, "Hey, I'm going to run for president." And very few of them thought it was a good idea. Truly. The primary response was, president of? [Laughter.] But we ground it out until we found an audience, raised \$40 million from over 400,000 Americans. And I sensed that at least a few of you were in the Yang Gang, so thank you for that. [Light applause.] That's the kind of applause I would have gotten when I was graduating. [Laughter.] Made it to seven presidential debate stages, which is where many of you met me, when you turned on the TV, and you were like, "Huh, Asian guy, different." And then you Googled me and were like, "Oh, he went to Columbia. Maybe I should like this guy."

But made it to those seven debate stages, mainstreamed universal basic income and cash relief as a policy solution, and helped expand what people think of as possible in American politics. And I am proud of the fact I was the first Asian American man to run for president as a Democrat. [Applause.] It is AAPI Heritage Month. I will say, Asian Americans are the most underrepresented group in the United States in terms of elected office, for reasons that some of you understand. And to the extent that I can help change that, I'd be very, very proud. And maybe some of you will end up helping to change that with me. If you are Asian, when you first heard about my campaign, I know what your first thought was: Please let him not be terrible. [Laughter.] But the rest of you are like, "Oh, this is new. Let me tune in to what he's saying." And this presidential campaign is why I'm here speaking with you all today, not my five months in the law or my career as an entrepreneur.

So the question I had to try and answer when I was preparing my remarks for tonight is, what wisdom can I impart as someone who has made objectively unwise career decisions multiple times throughout my own career? And I know where many of you are coming from. Law school graduates tend very strongly to be what I'm going to call institutionalists. You spent

three years learning legal arguments in a degree of intellectual rigor and discipline. You're trained to be experts in rules, and rules require structures and institutions to support them and make them work. You're also being recruited and have been recruited by high resourced firms and organizations that need smart people who can work hard. You also, I know, have certain expectations of your own careers and advancement and opportunities, as I did when I was in your shoes, your seat. And yet, this is an era you're entering of institutional struggle. We can all see that and feel it around us every day. For some of you, you're looking forward to getting into an environment where things will make sense, as long as you work hard and produce results. For others of you, you sense opportunities, but you're not quite sure how to track them down or pursue them yourself. And at the same time, you each have your own personal lives to figure out as you come to a point where those decisions actually will start having weight and meaning. So that's where I think you're coming from. Is that about right? Is that fairly accurate? Things haven't changed that much?

So my advice to you today is threefold. The first is to ride your brand new Columbia Law degree for all it's worth. Now, what does that mean? Now that you have a Columbia Law degree, people will assume that you are smart. [Laughter.] That means to truly maximize the value of this degree, you have to do some things that make people question whether you know what you're doing. Think about it: If you just did smart things from now on, why would you need the degree? You could have done smart things without the degree. Now that you have it, to make maximal use of it, you have to test what it can do. Think of it as having a get out of jail free card for the rest of your career. You have to make people question some decisions at some point. Now, I know there are parents here who are groaning. You're thinking, "Oh, no, I thought these days were over." My mom will tell you those days never end. They go on forever. But if your child plays it right, they, too, can be the 25th most well regarded political figure in all the land and come back and address the next era of graduating law students. So that's number one: Maximize the use of your degree.

The second thing is to try and find a problem that you can work on for years and feel good about dedicating the heart of your time and career to. It could be a market-based problem. It could be trying to improve treatment for a particular group. Whatever you care deeply about. Right now, I'm pursuing two related problems: alleviating poverty, which I see as completely unnecessary, and reforming our democracy that we can tell is functioning less and less over time. Now, these are very big projects that I can work on for years and feel good about. For many of you, you're not quite sure what animates or drives you, and that's completely fine. When I was your age, the problem I was most consumed with was getting a date, and I never did solve that problem until seven years later, when I met Evelyn. You can just do good work on what is in front of you while you wait. But keep an eye on what you're reading about, what you find yourself caring about or exploring further. Because one of the virtues of this new degree is that you can show up to just about anyone's doorstep and say to them, "I want to work with you and help solve the problem that you're working on," and they will be thrilled to have you. I can say with total confidence that if you are chasing a significant problem, someone is working on it right now. The greatest challenge that lies ahead is actually figuring out what it is that drives you, what you care about, because this process typically does take years and evolves over time. And to make matters worse, the market will try to hide it from you, not show it to you. So lie in wait for it. Stay the person who cares about important problems and can show up on someone's doorstep and say, "I'm here to help you."

And that leaves me with the highest ambition. And it's going to sound simple, but it's tough. Have confidence that you can do what you want and that the market will follow. So what do I mean by that? Most all of you were recruited by firms with big buckets for second years and are going to work for them, one of them, after graduation. It's fine. I did it, too. That's the market for people like you, people like us. But eventually, you may find yourself in a position where you want to do something, and the market does not exist yet. Know that if you work hard, you can create that market for yourself. When I ran for president, no one knew whether there was a demand for a candidate running on an idea like universal basic income. I thought it existed, but I needed to work hard to find out. And it took some time. Now I'm looking to do the same thing for a new, independent approach to politics and measures like ranked choice voting. There will be times in your career where you'll do what the market wants you to do, and there are times when you're going to have to stand up and go against it. But if you push hard in a direction that you care deeply about and work hard enough, the market will follow you. It will spring up around you. People will reach out to help you. It's the best feeling in the world when it happens. You form lifelong relationships. The more of you who experience what I'm describing right now, the better off our world will be. And what's funny is that this market I'm describing right now really is the people around you here tonight. You'll each receive a call or a message from a classmate at some point in the future saying, "Hey, I'm running for office," or "I'm going to start this new initiative," or "I'm going to take this risk." And when you get that message, remember this, and do what you can to help. We all have a role to play. If you're on the inside of an organization, lend a hand, gather some people together, invest some resources. We don't all have to quit our jobs, but we do have to support the person who is trying to discover if good people care enough to solve a problem and move forward.

So those are the three guideposts I have for you tonight: Make the most of your degree by testing people's belief that you know what you're doing, find a problem to solve that's significant enough that you can care about it for years and work hard on it gratefully, and have confidence that if you do what you want and work hard at it, the market will follow you, not the other way around. It's no exaggeration to say that the future of civilization may rest on the choices you all make. So find that voice inside you, apply yourself with the same energy you have to reaching your goals thus far, and I have no doubt that you'll do great things. Congratulations, Columbia Law School Class of '22. Let's do all we can with what we've been given and leave a future we will be proud of. Thank you, all, very much! Thank you. [Applause.]