

**Remarks of Enioluwada “Eni” Popoola ’22**  
**J.D. Class Speaker**  
**Columbia Law School Graduation**  
**Monday, May 16, 2022**

Class of 2022, it is truly an honor to stand before you on a day that many of us may have envisioned from the very first days of orientation. Though this ceremony may look like and feel like all that we could have imagined it to be—I might have jinxed it when I wrote that—none of us could predict all that would happen from the moments we stepped into the lecture halls of Jerome Greene for our very first Legal Methods class.

After a whirlwind of a fall semester spent adjusting to the demands of law school, we came back to campus at the start of 2020 eager to apply the lessons and maybe even disappointments of the first semester to the spring. Talks of a novel coronavirus began only as ever so brief mentions in passing in the hallways. And even on a warm March day of canceled classes, many took advantage by gathering together on this very lawn. The most assured, “See you in two weeks,” became the almost 20 months we spent scattered across the world, balancing our pursuit of a J.D. with the very real fears, anxieties, and uncertainties that the time warranted.

I like to think of our J.D. class as the unluckily lucky ones. The ones unlucky enough to spend nearly half of our law school experience communicating only through screens and lucky enough to celebrate the culmination together here today—something that wasn’t possible for the past two years. The ones unlucky enough to, at times, struggle for access to quiet housing or a strong internet connection at a time when our academic performance most depended on it but lucky enough to coincidentally have internet connectivity issues at the exact moment you were cold called. Well played. [Laughter.]

But we know our ability to celebrate here today is not at all due to luck. It is the result of the selfless sacrifice of many, including the campus maintenance workers and personnel who did everything they could to ensure we had a clean and safe campus to return to. [Applause.] And I know it was not by luck but by conscious effort that some of you helped launch an initiative that seeks to equip formerly incarcerated individuals with tools so that they, too, could enter careers in the legal field. [Cheers and applause.] It was by choice that some of you devoted part of your time at CLS to the clinics fighting for the rights of our nation’s most vulnerable, such as asylum seekers caught in the web of international politics gone awry. It was meticulous planning that led others to begin a new program meant to make admission to a place like Columbia Law School a reality for aspiring lawyers who, despite growing up in this very community, would not have had the resources to successfully apply without the guidance and help that we know it takes to do so.

Indeed, these past few years have been the sum of a commitment and courage to do at times painstaking work. All while snatching hold of whatever fleeting moments of rest life as a

law student would allow. And of course, there are the stories of how we got here. In my case, I know it was certainly not luck but a long chain of events set off by the decision of a young woman from Akure, Nigeria, who acted on faith, daring to make the decision to leave behind all that she knew to come to this country in pursuit of giving her children more. And while I cannot speak to each and every one of our stories, I know for sure that we all have them. So, to the people who came to celebrate with us today—our parents, spouses, loved ones, and yes, even the siblings who might resent that we made it a little bit harder for them to be the favorites—we cannot say this enough: Thank you. [Cheering and applause.]

To my classmates: There are going to be a lot of people congratulating us over the next few days and even over the course of the next few months, and rightfully so. We have worked tirelessly, schooling through successive phases of a global pandemic, witnessing a reignited movement for racial reckoning, battling personal struggles with mental health, literally weathering a storm, and so much more just to get here. But allow me to be perhaps one of a few to temper that flood of congratulations with just a trickle of caution. For better or for worse, we are entering a profession of immense power and influence. The kind that causes people to want to hear your thoughts when you share your line of work. The type of influence that may have already had people asking for your opinion on something they need help with long before you were even licensed to give them one, never mind the fact that you probably knew no more than they did about the issue to begin with. It takes discipline and integrity to positively harness the amount of influence that becoming a lawyer will give us and even more to relinquish it altogether at times when our presence may be more harmful to the very communities we seek to aid. In fact, the truth is that the most revolutionary changes our society needs will never come from the work we choose to do as lawyers but from the people who we choose to be. And so it is my hope that we learn the distinction between profession and purpose and that we come to know and experience more of the latter.

I hope that in the quest for justice and equity, we remember the less palatable counterparts of mercy and forgiveness. That reason and logic take heed to compassion and empathy. That in our paths to become the first, best, or most—as I trust many of us will go on to be—humility is the guide for our thinking and self-awareness the frame for our judgment. I hope that we never let being lawyers keep us from being the dreamers, thinkers, and advocates who put people before institutions, so that the word justice represents not an empty, overused platitude but a substantive principle ever transforming to the realities of the time and beckoning to the needs of the generation. And lastly, I hope that when overwhelmed with the myriad of problems in the world that beg our attention, time, and effort, still, we have the presence of mind to pick up our toolkit where we are and start chipping away bit by bit at at least just one.

Thank you, Class of 2022, and congratulations on three years well done.