

UNT COLLEGE OF LAW
FUNDAMENTALS DINNER
21st Century Lawyer
By Judge Tonya Parker

- I. Thank you for the kind introduction and for inviting me to be here tonight.
- II. I attended the Convocation ceremony on Sunday and got a chance to see some of you as you filed into the auditorium that afternoon.
- III. I listened, **along with you**, to those who addressed you that day, including your amazing Dean, **The Honorable Royal Furgeson**, and, of course, **The Honorable Chief Judge Carl Stewart**.
- IV. I witnessed you take the **Law School's Professionalism Pledge** and then a **Civility Pledge** inspired by the American Board of Trial Advocates.
- V. After the Convocation, I had the opportunity to meet some of you in my courtroom yesterday as you were escorted to the **George Allen Courthouse** by Professor

Wattley and others for a tour **before** starting law school.

And now, here we are, convened again. This time for a Dinner at the historic Belo Mansion—the home of our local bar associations **and place** where lawyers and judges gather for continuing legal education seminars, community service events, and fellowship.

- VI. Since this is your first time in law school, I want to tell you something that I am not sure you really appreciate—most law students across this state will not experience **during their entire three years of law school** the people, concepts, and places you've been exposed to in the last week. That fact is sad but true, and it has been true for a long time.

- VII. When I started law school almost 20 years ago to the day, I had never met a federal judge. **You** are being educated by one, and had your legal education kicked off with an address from the **Chief Judge** of a federal appeals court.

- VIII. When I started law school, I had never been to a courtroom, watched a hearing, or met an elected state court judge. **You, on the other hand,** spent the day at a courthouse and met several state district and county judges in their courtrooms where you watched them handle their dockets or, if court was not in session, discussed with them how they do.
- IX. When I started law school, I had never heard of the American Board of Trial Advocates, an organization of the nation's premier trial lawyers. **You** had the President of the Dallas Chapter work with your Student Bar Association President to craft a Civility Pledge for law students, borne out of ABOTA's own Civility Pledge for its lawyers. **And then,** the President of the Dallas Chapter attended your Convocation to administer the Pledge to **you**.
- X. I am also a bit embarrassed to admit that when I started law school two decades ago, I had never heard of the Belo Mansion, the Dallas Bar Association, or most of the other sister bars. **And here you are** seated at the Belo Mansion, being addressed by the Presidents of each of the local bar associations.

- XI. All of this is true, and you have not even had your first day of class.
- XII. Dare I say there are few law schools in the country, like UNT Dallas College of Law?
- XIII. What is clear from all that I have described is that the administrators and faculty of this institution did not launch the only public law school in the area to conduct ***business as usual*** as it relates to educating and exposing its students to our great profession.
- XIV. No, your law school is taking legal education to a place it has long needed to go—
- a. A place that teaches theory **and** practice;
 - b. Emphasizes the **Rule of Law and the principles associated with professionalism and civility**; and
 - c. To a place that ensures students have **regular interaction with the Bar they seek to join and the Bench before whom they seek to practice.**
- XV. UNT Dallas College of Law is a special place, and this event today is yet another example of **your law school's**

commitment to challenge the status quo, by rejecting outdated approaches to legal education in favor of those that will prepare you for the legal market of this millennium.

XVI. During the Convocation several people suggested that you might be asking the “**Am I Enough**” question as you approach your law school semester.

XVII. And you may be thinking that way, because you hold the view that Law School is **intellectually** what the Navy Seal Program is **physically**. You may see it as a grueling mental exercise whose aim is to get people to ring the proverbial bell.

XVIII. Let me tell you a little secret. The perception that you are holding **is not real or fair**, and is derived largely from a **small number of people** in the profession who allow you think of law school that way because it **makes them seem more awesome for having achieved what you are pursuing**.

XIX. I am here today to say that if you are asking the “Am I Enough” question, which I suspect is true for most of you, stop. **Stop it. Stop it right now.**

XX. I want you to pivot away from that question to a new one.

XXI. One that sets your sights on what there is to be **achieved by your legal education and how you will achieve it**, rather than **what there is to conquer and the prospect that it might conquer you**.

XXII. One of the reasons I want you to move away from “Enough” question is because it implies some things that are just not true.

XXIII. It implies that you are in this thing alone. You are not. The same support system that got you through the application process is likely still **flanking or covering** you, ready to tackle this mountain with you the same way you tackled that process. **You also have the support of your administrators and professors** who have a **stake** in your success.

And, because of the breadth and depth of relationships your esteemed educators have in this legal market and across the country, the entire Dallas Legal community **is not merely pulling for you** to succeed; **it is partnering**

with your school on a host of programs **to ensure that you actually can.**

XXIV. The “Am I Enough” question also falsely implies that law school is a competition. **It is not a competition.**

It is a petri dish, really. The goal is not to get you to fail or quit, but rather to develop you in a controlled environment into lawyers who will be useful to the community in solving the problems of the day.

XXV. I want you to reject the “enough” question because it wrongly suggests that there is a specific formula for success, that is, that there is some **characteristic or trait you could be enough of.**

There is no set formula for success in law school or in the profession. No one (1) approach will work for everyone. You will have to find what works for you in terms of **studying, retaining and organizing information, taking exams, and finding clerkship and mentor opportunities.**

XXVI. So, don't waste any more of your time (which, by the way, you no longer have to waste) questioning whether

you have what you need to succeed in law school **to avoid ringing that bell.**

XXVII. The real question for you, now law students at a new law school in the epicenter of one of the top ten legal markets in the country, is this—

Will you accept the challenge of being transformed into a 21st century lawyer who will solve 21st century problems for 21st century clients?

That is the question that you need to answer before you enter the doors of the law school next week.

XXVIII. Who is a 21st century lawyer? First, lest there be any confusion, let me tell you who it is not.

- a. A 21st century lawyer is not a lawyer who knows **the law**, but does not know the Professional Rules that govern **his** conduct **or** the Procedural Rules that govern our courts.
- b. A 21st century Lawyer is not a lawyer who **knows** the Rules but then fails or refuses to follow them.
- c. A 21st century lawyer is not the person who focuses more on the money she can make, than the clients she can serve.

XXIX. **A 21st Century lawyer** is:

- a. One who knows the law and the Rules, and is diligent about keeping abreast of the changes and developments in both.
- b. She is a lawyer who knows that a law degree and license are the **price** of admission to our profession, but the ongoing **toll** to participate involves two other concepts--**civility and professionalism**.
- c. The 21st Century lawyer walks the walk and talks the talk because she exemplifies our Lawyer's Creed by practicing law in a manner that honors her duties of candor, diligence, and service.
- d. She is **resolved to leave the profession** better than she found it, and **avoid conducting herself in a manner that detracts from the public's confidence in lawyers and our court system**.
- e. A 21st Century lawyer's focus is on the clients and the work, not money or prestige.

XXX. Fix an image in your mind of that person, and show up next week intent on being molded into that image so that when you graduate in 2018 you will be ready to solve 21st problems.

XXXI. At the courthouse, I get to see the issues that are on the horizon for your generation to litigate and deal with.

a. They range **from** evidentiary issues arising out of how prolific our society has become with social media.

b. **To** countless substantive legal issues, including those that are developing:

i. in light of the Fifth Circuit's recent ruling striking down Texas' Voter ID Law, and

ii. The U.S. Supreme Court's recent decisions related to **Fair Housing laws, employment discrimination cases, and First Amendment issues.**

c. **And, of course, the High Court's historic marriage equality decision will have implications in tort, family law, and probate cases.**

XXXII. In addition to the legal issues mentioned, there are numerous social issues **for well-trained lawyers to weigh-in on through their leadership in community organizations or pro bono service, such as:**

- a. issues related to **police training and policies** regarding the appropriate use of force;
- b. the surge of sex trafficking and unaccompanied minor cases, and
- c. the legal issues facing many of our veterans.

XXXIII. These are just some of the 21st century issues you need spend the next three years preparing your minds to prosecute and defend; speak out against or speak up for. **Because that is what 21st century lawyers do.**

XXXIV. Finally, will you accept the challenge to meet the needs of 21st century clients?

Traditionally, our legal system has provided lawyers for those on opposite ends of the spectrum.

If the prospective client is wealthy, there are scores of lawyers and law firms who will line-up to compete for his, her, or its business and will serve them well.

If a person lives at or below the poverty line, they can access non-profits, law school clinics, and other pro bono service providers.

XXXV. The 21st century clients are those in the middle of the spectrum that our profession has under-served or just flatly priced out.

They are middle class people, including many small business owners, **who have some means to pay for reasonably priced legal services at reasonable rates or under blended billing arrangements.** Fee arrangements that allow them to feed their families, make payroll, and afford legal representation too.

If you are committed to serving these clients, your law school has a unique curriculum that will tool you to meet their needs.

XXXVI. As you approach law school next week, do not enter the doors **with questions about whether you are enough to compete and succeed.**

Enter the doors with your eyes fixed on being transformed into a **lawyer who will be trained to tackle**

the problems of our day for the segment of the public who has been locked out of accessing legal services for too long.

Becoming a 21st century lawyer who will handle 21st century problems for 21st century Clients; that is your charge.

XXXVII. I urge you in this manner because I believe, as President Lincoln once said, “If you are resolutely determined to make a good lawyer of yourself, the thing is more than half done already.”

Thank you! Have a great school year!