

SLS JD Class Speech, June 2013 by Matthew F. Ferraro

[As prepared for delivery]

Greetings and salutations: faculty and staff, family and friends, the one and only, irreplaceable Class of 2013.

Might I say, you make those tams look good.

My friends, I have some news for you. We are all unique—in interests and experiences, in backgrounds and aspirations, in where we come from, and where we will go. But there is *one thing* that unites us all: We are all deeply and profoundly *in debt*. I mean like drowning in debt. And I don't just mean debt in a financial sense—although in my case, that kind of debt is substantial. The truth is we are all deeply indebted to *everyone* who made this moment possible for us. To the parents who supported us from the very beginning, to the loved ones who sustained us, to the faculty who educated and inspired us, to the staff, who never get enough credit, who do the real day-to-day work of running this school, who, among other things, keep the lights on the and the buildings heated—except for Room 180 which is kept at a brisk 38 degrees.

What *we* have done is really only possible because of what *they* have *all* done. So sometimes the cliché turns out to be true: This day belongs to all of them just as much as it belongs to us. So I just wanted to say: “Thank you.”

I am told my task this morning is to speak for the JD class. As anyone knows who has ever read the emails that we send to each other on the “law-talk” email list serv, the members of the Class of 2013 really have no problem speaking for themselves.

So I'm going to do something different. I'm just going to ask my classmates a question and offer a three-part answer. To the non-lawyers in the audience, that's what we call road-mapping an argument. My question is this: *What does it mean to have a shared history?* What does it mean for us to have been part of the Stanford JD Class of 2013? We all could have gone to different law schools or gone to law school at different times, but some design of Providence, or some design of Faye Deal's—and I'm not always sure there's a difference between the two—brought us all together at *this* place and at *this* time. So what?

First, part of having a shared history means having *shared experiences*. For instance, I just made a joke about Room 180. Why? Because *we all know* that Room 180 is really cold. That's an experience we've shared.

We've shared others, too: Late-night study sessions on the second floor of the library, lounging on the green Mungerturf, Bluebooking through endless galley nights, enjoying bar review at the Nuthouse, or deviled eggs at the Dutch Goose, dancing at Illusions or Rudy's, listening to friend rap at the open mic (yeah, I'm not sure what that is, either), or—my personal favorite—choosing what lunch talk to attend based on which student organization had the better food. (Seriously, I was

never more interested in textualism than when I realized the Federalist Society was serving Thai food.)

Of course all law students have those *sorts* of experiences, but these have been *uniquely ours*. They bind our individual journeys together, and they bind us, in a way, to one another.

We built this shared history even in unhappy times. When a law-talk email made us cringe. When a cold call made us stumble. When our cert. petition was denied, or our client got a sentence he didn't deserve, or when, despite our best efforts, an exam didn't break our way. We've built common bonds in moments of personal trial, too. When we suffered disappointment, or illness, or deep personal loss and found solace, and maybe even comfort, in the camaraderie of one another. Those experiences, no less than the happy ones, have shaped our history together.

Second, shared history isn't something that just happens to us but it is also *how we react* to circumstances. And here, too, our experience has been unique. I don't know if you've heard the rumors, but I'm told law school elsewhere can be kind of brutal—like the worst three years of your life. But here, we built a strong, charitable community. And not just because of the palm trees and the sun—as nice as those are—but because we, individually and collectively, chose to build a community that would appeal to our better selves. In our best moments, we linked ambition with compassion. Achievement with empathy. And excellence with humility. That's not to say that everything was perfect, but I think it says something special about *this* place and about *our* class that most of us chose to spend the night after our last exam *together*—trapped on a boat in the middle of San Francisco Bay during a 3L sunset cruise. And no one ended up in the water.

Third and finally, sharing a common history means *being shaped* by that history, too. To speak personally: I came to law school at 28. And I thought I was pretty well-formed and pretty stubborn. But as I prepared for this speech one of the most remarkable things I realized is that over the past three years, I've changed. And I realize I've changed because of all of you. Being surrounded by colleagues of such intelligence and experience—from soldiers to sailors, marines to airmen, scholars to bankers, human rights activists to teachers, journalists to scientists, and so many more—has given me new perspectives on things I thought I knew and made me realize, in a very humbling way, the many things that I don't know. And maybe, just maybe, somewhere along the way I even learned to “think like a lawyer.”

This person that I've become—this more real version of myself—will be the person that leaves here and goes on with the rest of my life. So, it occurs to me, that part of having a shared history means having a shared future, too. Because after these years together, we are all, in some fashion, the product of the influences of each other.

There's a rule—I think it's a rule anyway—that all law graduation speeches have to end with a quote from a Supreme Court Justice, so here's mine. Late in his life, Thurgood Marshall said that

the “miracle” of the Constitution was not its “birth . . . but its life.”¹ By that he meant not the original writing of the document but the 200-year effort to perfect it. If it’s not stretching the metaphor too far, I hope something similar will be true for us. What I hope is that when we look back at our lives years from now, what we’ll remember most fondly is not our class’s “birth”—the years we spent together here, in this paradise—but its “life”: the lives we led *after* this moment of our parting—having shared and been shaped by our common history—hopefully doing our part to make a world of our highest aspirations where the weak are secure and the just are free.

Fellow graduates of 2013, I don’t know where you all will go from here, but I can’t wait to watch and to cheer as you write the next chapters in our (collective) history.

Godspeed, my friends, and congratulations.

¹ Thurgood Marshall, Remarks at the Annual Seminar of the San Francisco Patent and Trademark Law Association (May 6, 1987), *available at* http://www.thurgoodmarshall.com/speeches/constitutional_speech.htm.