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Michael M. Bowden

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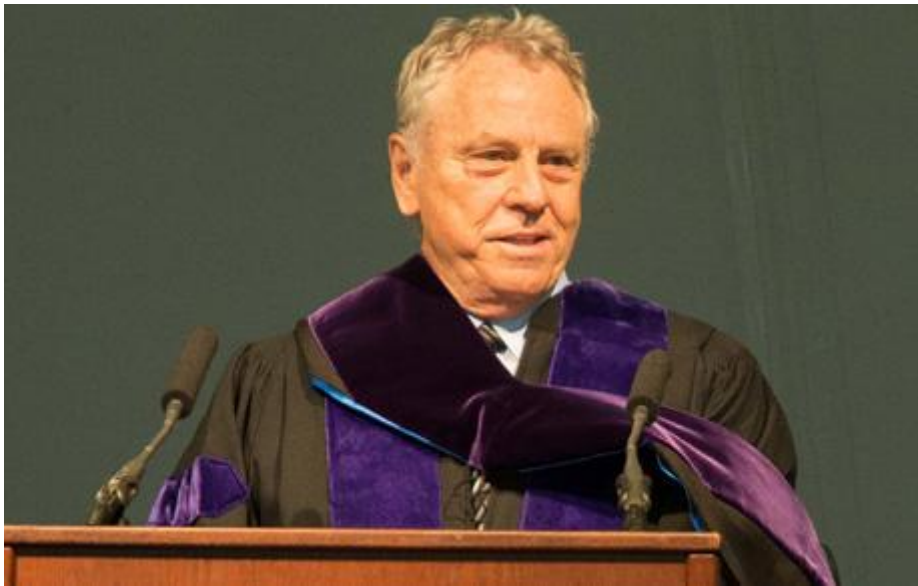
Bowden, Michael M., "For 164 New RWU Law Graduates, 'The Keys to the Gates of Justice'" (2013).
Featured News Story. 132.

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For 164 New RWU Law Graduates, 'The Keys to the Gates of Justice'

Legendary civil rights attorney Morris Dees urges members of the School of Law Class of 2013 to fight for justice



May 17, 2013 | Michael M. Bowden

BRISTOL, R.I. – As Roger Williams University School of Law prepares to kick off its 20th Anniversary year, Morris Dees – a preeminent civil rights attorney and founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center – addressed the 164 graduates Class of 2013 during Commencement exercises today.

"After 53 years of law practice, I can tell you that I am so proud to be a lawyer," he told the graduates. "America is a nation of laws, and lawyers led the way long before we were a country. ... We know that lawyers wrote our Constitution and our Declaration of Independence. They're essential to democracy."

Dees, who won a series of groundbreaking civil rights cases aimed at integrating government and public institutions, received an honorary degree, along with state Superior Court Presiding Justice Alice B. Gibney. Gibney's son, Nicholas Parrillo also earned a law degree at Roger Williams Friday.

"You hold the keys to the gates of justice," Dees told the law graduates. "It is a solemn responsibility. Because there are still tyrants today, like King George was a tyrant. ... And there will be cases that come before you that will try you as a person as to whether you will take a stand – that

will give you an opportunity to take a stand for justice.”

“You know,” he said, “human rights begin close to home in our schools, in our communities, and in our workplaces. And unless people find justice and human rights in these places, then we as a nation will look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

Dees also paid tribute to the school’s namesake and Rhode Island’s founder.

“I knew Roger Williams before you ever, ever heard about him,” Dees said, “because I’m a Baptist from Alabama, and we understood him to be a courageous man who got run out of Massachusetts and set up this state freedom, for individual rights and liberty. What a great name for a law school to have!”

Other speakers at the event included valedictorian Andrew S. Tugan, who shared memories of the many classmates who provided help, support and friendship during his law school career, noting that – as solitary a pursuit as law school and legal practice may sometimes seem – it is ultimately “a team sport.”

In presenting the graduating class, Associate Dean Andrew Horwitz advised, “As you leave the familiar grounds of law school to undertake a career in the law, I challenge you to retain that sense of hope and optimism that you brought with you on your first day of law school.”

Earlier in the ceremony, RWU President Donald J. Farish had noted the law school’s profound impact on Rhode Island legal and political culture.

“We have seen, in the 20-year history of this school, how profound the impact of a law school has been on the workings of the State of Rhode Island,” Dr. Farish said. “In addition to the obvious improvement in the quality of practice and the much greater availability of legal services to the public, there is also no question that the law school has played a significant role in reducing corruption and unethical behavior on the part of public officials.”

Attorney Mark Mandell – a member of University’s Board of Trustees, chairman of the School of Law’s Board of Directors, and a popular adjunct professor, also focused on the importance of personal and professional ethics.

“No matter how important money is – and it’s got its importance – it is never as important as the quality with which we live our lives,” Mandell said. “The unwise choices we make when we focus on money and short-term gain are too many, so we always have to place the value of human spirit and personal ethics over personal gain. ... You won’t be remembered for how much you have at the end of your life; you will be remembered by how much you have given.”

Dean David A. Logan delivered a heartfelt tribute to his friend and mentor, the late Chief Justice Joseph R. Weisberger ’92H, ’97H(Law) of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, who passed away last December, posthumously awarding him the Dean’s Distinguished Service Award.

“Chief Justice Weisberger was one of the earliest champions of the idea of a law school in Rhode Island,” Dean Logan said. In his many roles at Roger Williams – including as chair of the School of Law’s Board of Directors and a member of the University’s Board of Trustees, the Chief “unfailingly

offered sage advice that shaped the trajectory of Roger Williams University and its law school,” Logan said. “He was very proud of what we have built here in Bristol, and this is the first Commencement in a decade that he is not with us to share in the achievements of the students arrayed before the dais.”

Chief Justice Weisberger’s wife, Sylvia, and children were in attendance at today’s ceremony. His son, J. Robert Weisberger, a prominent Rhode Island attorney and RWU Law adjunct, accepted for the family, and welcomed the new graduates to the profession.

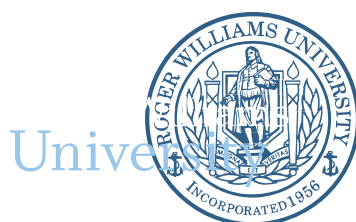
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