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Roger Williams University School of Law

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May 18, 2018

Law School News

RWU Law Celebrates Commencement 2018

RWU Law honors 130 graduates in ceremony keynoted by national immigration advocate with local roots; also recognizing noted jurist and founding faculty members



RWU Law celebrated Commencement 2018 on May 18 in Bristol, R.I.
Image Credit: Andrea Hansen

May 18, 2018 Michael M. Bowden

A cool, breezy, partly sunny day on Mt. Hope Bay provided a classic “spring in New England” backdrop as immigration advocate Marielena Hincapié delivered a rousing address to the 130 graduates of the Class of 2018 during Commencement exercises here Friday.

Hincapié, who has served for the past decade as executive director of the Los Angeles-based National Immigration Law Center – the only national legal advocacy organization in the U.S.

exclusively dedicated to defending and advancing the rights and opportunities of low-income immigrants and their families – was born in Colombia and raised in Central Falls, R.I.

“I cannot think of a better career to be embarking on than a legal career,” she told the graduates. “You are entering the legal field at the very moment that this country needs you. You get to shape the future of our country and shape the laws that ensure true inclusivity, equality and opportunities for all of us.”

“When I look at you, I see the future judges of Rhode Island’s courts and our federal courts,” Hincapié said. “I see state legislators and U.S. Congress members. I see lawyers who will take pro bono cases, who will represent indigent people, workers and refugees. I see future members of boards of directors of nonprofit organizations. I see so many of you who are going to work on developing new policies – that address climate change, that address gentrification and the housing crisis in this country, that ensure everyone has access to quality and affordable health care. I see lawyers who will represent women and children; who will support young leaders like those in Parkland, Fla. I see you ensuring that no African-American parent will be afraid when their children go out, especially if they are young black men. You will represent the numerous people facing discrimination in our country – the low-income, the underprivileged, the LGBTQ – people who need you. I see you as future law school professors shaping the next generation of public interest lawyers. That is who I see in you. That is who you are becoming today. I see you and I know this is a great time to be alive.”

During Commencement, the School of Law also presented an honorary degree to the Honorable George E. Healy Jr., retired chief judge of the Rhode Island Workers' Compensation Court.

It was a year to mark milestones as well, with Dean Michael J. Yelnosky paying tribute to Professor Anthony J. Santoro, founding dean of RWU Law; and Professor Bruce I. Kogan, who – besides twice serving as Interim Dean – pioneered many of the school’s deep experiential programs more than two decades ago. Both retired this year.

The Honorable William Edward Smith, Chief Judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island and chair of RWU Law’s Board of Directors, thanked three departing board members – the Honorable Bruce M. Selya, Senior Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit; Ronald A. Cass, Dean Emeritus of Boston University School of Law and president of Cass & Associates, PC; and Robin G. Steinberg, CEO of The Bail Project, a national holistic public defense organization – for their efforts on behalf of RWU Law. Between the two of them, Judge Selya and Cass brought as array of U.S. Supreme Court Justices to RWU Law, including Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg earlier this year, Justice Samuel A. Alito and Justice Antonin G. Scalia in years past.

Chosen by the graduating class, Professor Tanya J. Monestier was honored as Best Full-Time Professor; and Tara I. Allen, of the Federal Public Defenders Office for the District of Rhode Island, as Best Adjunct Professor (Allen will be joining RWU Law this fall as a full-time, tenure-track associate professor). For this year's Best Staff Member award, the class selected Brittany Raposa, the school’s Associate Director of Bar Support.

Graduate Samantha Armstrong was cheered in her absence, having given birth to a son just hours earlier. A nostalgic and heartfelt valedictory address was delivered by Jennifer E. Lisi, who joked that law school had changed the class's collective vocabulary, noting, "If there is a *scintilla* of trouble for any of the *aforementioned* graduates, under the *totality of the circumstances*, it would be *impracticable* not to rely on each other."