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## Law School News: Law Graduates Urged To 'Help Bring Society Together' 05-17-2019

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*Roger Williams University School of Law*

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May 17, 2019

# ***Law School News***

## **Law Graduates Urged to ‘Help Bring Society Together’**

RWU Law graduates, family, friends, alumni, board members, faculty and staff celebrated Commencement 2019 with an inspiring keynote, valuable advice, and lots of memories.



RWU Law celebrated Commencement 2019 on May 17 in Bristol, R.I.  
Image Credit: RWU Law/Andrea Hansen

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Michael M. Bowden

BRISTOL, R.I., May 17, 2019 – A cool, cloudy day prevailed but the rain stayed away during Commencement exercises here Friday as noted legal scholar Lee Epstein urged the 130 graduates of the Roger Williams University School of Law’s Class of 2019 to use their newly minted legal skills to “help bring society and people together.”

Epstein, the Ethan A.H. Shepley Distinguished University Professor at Washington University in St. Louis, focuses her academic work on law and legal institutions, and especially the behavior of judges. She has authored or co-authored more than 130 articles and essays and 18 books, including *The Choices Justices Make*.

To loud applause, Epstein began by taking a selfie with the graduates, noting that they hailed from around the country and the world, and citing some of their impressive statistics: "Together you have completed the equivalent of 11,800 semester hours, taken 2,640 exams, written papers of 726,000 words, and devoted a stunning 14,000 to law-related pro bono work. Wow!"

Epstein observed that in the current political climate, judges appointed by Democrats and those appointed by Republican presidents are making very "different decisions on many hot-button issues of the day, like abortion, guns, campaign finance and capital punishment." That makes the courts complicit in a deepening societal rift that has manifested in "fear and loathing on both sides," she said.

But a legal education, Epstein added, provides "exactly the right tools and sets of skills" to break this "devastating cycle." These include:

1. **Respect.** "Either side can make good arguments. Good policies can come from either side of the partisan divide."
2. **Communication.** "Every successful and effective interaction – in the classroom, in the courtroom or in the clinic – is two-way. We all value our freedom to speak. But without listening, we're in a perpetual shouting match, always talking past each other."
3. **Collaboration.** "When we come together we are stronger. As a lawyer, you now have the skills to unite us in common purpose, to bring us together."

Epstein closed with a reference to Shakespeare's well-known line, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers," from *Henry VI, Part 2*, noting that its contextual meaning is widely misunderstood.

"The characters in Shakespeare's play who proposed eliminating all the lawyers wanted to provoke widespread civil unrest in the hope of destroying the ancient rights of the English," Epstein said. "They wanted to promote chaos and disorder, but they knew that the lawyers would stand in their way, because they understood that lawyers unite not divide. The lawyers were a threat precisely because of their great power to bring people together."

*"Law matters and our students know it." ~ RWU Law Dean Michael J. Yelnosky*

During Commencement ceremonies, honorary degrees were also presented to Ashbel T. Wall, II, retired director of the Rhode Island Department of Corrections, and veteran Providence trial attorney Peter A. DiBiase. (Due to illness, Wall was unable to attend the ceremony. At his request, Assistant Attorney General Michael W. Field '97, accepted the degree on his behalf.)

To underline the importance of public interest work to the community as well as legal education,

Dean Michael J. Yelnosky read heartfelt notes from prisoners who were helped by students participating in RWU Law pro bono programs. "Law matters and our students know it," he said.

It was a year to mark milestones as well. Yelnosky paid tribute to the university's 10th president, Dr. Donald J. Farish, who passed away unexpectedly last summer, and its 11th, Dr. Ioannis Maioulis, who will take the reins this summer – as well as interim president Andrew Workman, who admirably performed the "unsexy but exceedingly important" work of directing the university between administrations. Yelnosky also remembered Class of 2019 member Mordechai Smith, who died near the end of his 1L year. Both Smith and Farish were honored with a moment of silence.

Yelnosky awarded the Dean's Distinguished Service Award to Chelsie Horne, longtime director of RWU Law's Office of Programs & Events. He also noted the impending departure of Deborah Johnson, the law school's Director of Diversity and Outreach, who helped the school exceed 30 percent ethnic and racial diversity during her eight-year tenure.

Chosen by the graduating class, Professor of Writing Justin Kishbaugh was honored as Best Full-Time Professor; and Visiting Assistant Professor of Business Law Andrew Spacone was called out as Best Adjunct Professor. For this year's Best Staff Member award, the class selected Brittany Raposa, the school's Associate Director of Bar Support, for the second year in a row.

The Honorable William E. Smith, Chief Judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island and chair of RWU Law's Board of Directors, called the school's future "enormously bright" and urged graduates to "do good as you do well."

Valedictorian Nicole Rohr, a native Missourian who already holds a Ph.D. in biological science, and is a former Knauss Fellow and Capitol Hill legislative assistant as well as an assistant research professor at the University of Rhode Island, shared her broad perspective with her classmates. "Never fear changing your direction," she said. "Ranging down a new path often requires leaving something behind, whether that is moving from familiar surroundings or letting go of a career choice that no longer fits your vision of the future. Take a risk."

On Saturday, May 18, U.S. Senator Jack Reed will deliver the commencement address to more than 1,200 students at the Roger Williams University undergraduate commencement. The university will also present honorary degrees to civil rights leader Clifford R. Montiero, who marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and served as president of the NAACP Providence branch for a decade, and to Marcia Morris, Vice Chair of the RWU Board of Trustees and a Presidential Search Committee co-chair who served in executive management and chief legal officer roles during her career.