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May 15, 2020

Law School News

A Commencement Like No Other

RWU Law graduates, family, friends, alumni, faculty and staff gather online for a "Virtual Commencement" to mark what should have been — and anticipate in-person celebrations to come.

May 15, 2020

Michael M. Bowden



"Virtual Commencement" 2020 at RWU Law

A cool, cloudy morning gave way to a sunny afternoon in Bristol Friday as a “virtual Commencement” observance was held to honor the 147 graduates of [Roger Williams University School of Law’s Class of 2020](#), pending an in-person event to be held when the COVID-19 pandemic has passed.

The ceremony opened with a brief, live preamble on Zoom, which was hosted by Dean Michael J. Yelnosky and gave graduates (some wearing graduation robes for the occasion), faculty, staff and families a chance to see one another at the moment the processional march would have begun.

Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo opened [the 45-minute video ceremony](#) — hosted on YouTube premieres, and assembled by RWU Law's events, communications, and marketing departments — with a frank acknowledgement of what everyone was undoubtedly thinking: “I know this isn’t exactly how you thought your graduation ceremony would be ...”

The governor went on, however, to state, “You are going into a good and noble profession, and I have very high hopes for you. I can’t wait to see all that you’ll accomplish.”

Dean Yelnosky’s then took the virtual podium, noting that, “What is missing today is simple, but profound. We cannot be proximate, and that has robbed you of much of the magic of this day. But not all of it.”

Yelnosky told the graduates that, as lawyers, “you now have special skills and status that will allow you to help strengthen and improve your communities, wherever they may be. One client, one neighbor, one child at a time, you can and will change the world.”

And he promised that a real celebration — complete with handshakes, hugs and kisses on the cheek — would be held on a future day, when “we all can be together.”

“We did it. And nothing, not even a global pandemic, can take that away from us.”

~ Valedictorian Sarah Boucher

Next came a message from [Chief Justice Margaret H. Marshall](#), retired 35th Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, who was awarded an honorary doctorate of law and was to have given the commencement address at the in-person event originally planned for this day.

Drawing on the experiences of her university days as an anti-Apartheid activist in her native South Africa, and the countless small gestures and victories that ultimately led to victory in that struggle, she urged RWU Law's graduates to fight for the United States’ values and institutions.

“These are challenging times for *our* freedom,” she said. “I’m not speaking of threats from abroad. I am speaking of threats to liberty arising here at home, threats to the very structure of government, on which our freedom rests. Your intellect, energy and daring can contribute so much to the solutions for our breaking systems.”

Marshall added, “Each of you must decide whether to protect our constitutional values or to repudiate them. And make no mistake: inaction and indifference *are* acts of repudiation.”

Honorary degrees were also presented to [Dennis W. Nixon](#), the director of Rhode Island Sea Grant, a professor of marine affairs at the University of Rhode Island, and a member of the advisory board of the Marine Affairs Institute at RWU Law; and to [Olin W. Thompson, III](#), a former and much-admired assistant federal public defender for the District of Rhode Island, who is currently battling ALS.

It was a year to mark milestones as well. The [commencement program](#) offered an *in memoriam* to Professor Anthony J. Santoro, the founding dean of RWU Law (1992-1993) and President Emeritus of Roger Williams University (1993-2000), who died at 77 on September 9, 2019, following a short illness.

Tribute was also paid to Yelnosky himself, who will step down on June 30, 2020, concluding an extraordinary six-year deanship at RWU Law. A visionary leader and champion of social justice in legal education, Yelnosky has dedicated 27 years to the law school, both as a founding faculty member and as dean. His tenure marked an important period of growth for the school. At a time when many law schools were retrenching in the wake of recession, Dean Yelnosky focused on positioning RWU Law to remain “aggressively relevant.”

RWU President Ioannis Maioulis, Ph.D., certified the graduates, noting that the virtual nature of Friday’s celebration did “not diminish the importance of the day or how proud you should be to have reached this amazing accomplishment. There is nothing ‘virtual’ about what you have done over the past three years.”

Associate Dean for Academic Affairs Jared Goldstein read the roll call of graduates. Dean Yelnosky awarded the Dean’s Distinguished Service Award to Professor Raquel M. Ortiz, assistant dean for Library & Information Services.

Chosen by the graduating class, [Professor Tara I. Allen](#) was honored as Professor of the Year, and Chief Justice Weisberger Visiting Professor of Law [David Coombs](#) was named Adjunct Professor of the Year. As Staff Member of the Year, the class selected [Ann Marie Thompson](#), assistant director of Student Finance & Records.

Despite the lack of an in-person Commencement ceremony, valedictorian Sarah D. Boucher urged her classmates to celebrate all the same. “Three years of stress, frustration, maybe a few tears, and an unbelievable amount of hard work and dedication, have finally paid off,” she said. “We did it. And nothing, not even a global pandemic, can take that away from us.”