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Law School News: 'Nothing Short Of Extraordinary' 05/21/2021

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May 21, 2021

Law School News

'Nothing Short of Extraordinary'

RWU Law's Class of 2021 celebrates a hybrid commencement as the nation emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic.

May 21, 2021

| Michael M. Bowden



The sunny, moderately warm weather could not have provided a more perfect setting for Commencement exercises here Friday, as Roger Williams University School of Law's Class of 2021 participated in an in-person Grad Walk, followed by a virtual ceremony in which a pioneering jurist urged the 153 graduates to “advocate for causes that you firmly believe in” and “educate where you can make a difference.”

In keeping with pandemic-emergence practices across the state and much of the nation, the law school community celebrated with a hybrid ceremony. At midday, students participated in a [Grad Walk](#), marching in socially distanced groups with two guests each to receive their diplomas (and warm greetings from faculty and staff, as well as t-shirts and cupcakes!). A number of graduates from RWU Law's Class of 2020 – which [missed out on an in-person ceremony](#) due to the pandemic – also participated in the Grad Walk, receiving their diplomas from then-Dean Michael J. Yelnosky.

A [virtual commencement ceremony](#) followed at 5 p.m., preceded by a brief live “kickoff” on Zoom before the ceremony began on YouTube Premieres.

Following a rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner” performed by RWU alumna Emily S. Rizzo ’19, Rhode Island Governor Daniel J. McKee opened the ceremony, noting, “I know this past year hasn’t been an easy one, and learning has been far from conventional, but you’ve all adapted to the challenges and made it to the finish line. I wish you the best and look forward to all you’ll accomplish in the future.”

RWU Dean Gregory W. Bowman next addressed the class.

“Law school is always hard, always challenging, always stressful,” he told them. “But to have gone to law school and completed it during a global pandemic – and to not have just survived but thrived – is nothing short of amazing and extraordinary. We are so very proud of you, and we hope you are proud of yourselves. This is a great accomplishment.”

Bowman added, “I am so pleased, honored and privileged to welcome you as colleagues in the legal profession. This day you become lawyers. So go and be great lawyers. Live greatly within the law, and change the world, one client, one project at a time. You earned this.”

The ceremony’s keynote speaker was the Honorable Edward C. Clifton, a pioneering jurist who served as an Associate Justice on the Rhode Island Superior Court for more than 20 years, before retiring in 2015. Judge Clifton opened his remarks by paraphrasing the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, stating that “a person’s character is that person’s fate.”

He continued, “This past decade in the United States, like others before, we have witnessed speeches and debates, divisions between people of different races, economic levels, political ideologies, and personal concerns. Throughout your education here at Roger Williams, you have been encouraged to become involved in social justice issues.” Referencing the late U.S. Representative John Lewis (D-Ga.), Judge Clifton encouraged the graduates to “engage in good trouble” as lawyers.

“You may find yourself in the midst of a controversy that causes you a dilemma – your ethical concerns versus other considerations,” he said. “Continue to be mindful of maintaining your good character. Take on the challenges [where] your career takes you. Advocate for causes that you firmly believe in. Defend individuals, businesses or causes that you determine are entitled to your professionalism. Educate where you conclude that you can make a difference. Do all of this work, but remember: how you do it will determine your fate.”

A honorary degree was also awarded to Lynette Labinger, a highly regarded constitutional and civil rights attorney based in Providence.

Valedictorian Tatiana Maria Gomez then took the virtual podium with a thoughtful and heartfelt address.

“Law school is notoriously challenging, even in the best of circumstance,” she said. “But our class persevered through more than the usual level of difficulty. Many of us faced additional struggles as well, whether we were taking care of our families, juggling jobs with our schoolwork, facing grief or loss, surviving physical or mental health concerns, or simply being the first in our families to attend this crazy thing called law school.”

Gomez then observed that there were two types of “difficulty” that she and many of her classmates experienced in law school. One was the substantive challenge of acquiring legal skills and knowledge.

The second, she said, was the “inner turmoil” caused by “reading cases that seemed illogical or incorrectly decided. It’s the feeling that arises when you – a law student who purposefully pursued a profession meant to bring justice – see the law used for anything but. I think we all know this feeling. ... [But] we’re empowered now to go out and do something about it.”

Ioannis N. Miaoulis, Ph.D., President of Roger Williams University and Roger Williams University School of Law, then certified the class as eligible to receive their law degrees.

“There’s nothing virtual about all you have done over the last three years,” he told them. “You and your classmates have given so much and served the neediest members of society. You have been shaped by your professors, in the classroom and in the field, into outstanding practitioners. You have interned with the best judges, prosecutors, public defenders, corporations, and so much more. And the thousands of hours of pro bono work you have done [reflects] the dedication to giving back to the community that Roger Williams University School of Law has instilled in you.”

After a roll call read by Jared A. Goldstein, Professor of Law and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, the virtual ceremony ended with an extended series of video greetings and congratulations from staff, adjuncts and faculty members.

In the week leading up to the ceremony, Dean Bowman awarded the Dean’s Distinguished Service Award to Ralph E. Tavares, Jr., Director of Diversity and Outreach.

“Ralph’s work at the law school has been essential to our success this year,” Bowman said. “I have relied on his insights, his wisdom, his compassion, and his lived commitment to our mission and values. I deeply appreciate his support for our students, and in particular our students of color in this moment of national reckoning about race and racism. Watching him in action over the past year, I know that he views his work as a calling to make the world a better and more inclusive place for all.”

Chosen by the graduating class, Associate Director & Professor of Bar Support [Brittany L. Raposa](#) was honored as Professor of the Year. For the second year in a row, Chief Justice Weisberger Visiting Professor of Law [David Coombs](#) was honored as Adjunct Professor of the Year. For this year’s Best Staff Member award, the class selected [Ann Marie Thompson](#), RWU Law’s assistant director of Student Finance & Records, also for the second year in a row.

On Saturday and Sunday, May 22 and 23, RWU will celebrate its commencement. Sagamore William Guy, chief of the Pokanoket Nation, and Lorén Spears, executive director of the Tomaquag Indigenous Museum, will jointly deliver [the commencement address for the Class of 2020 and Class of 2021](#) during a weekend of safely designed celebrations.