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May 19, 2023

Law School News

Commencement 2023: RWU Graduates Urged to ‘Work Hard and Dream Big Dreams’

Fred D. Gray, Esq., a pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement, delivered the Commencement address at the School of Law ceremony.

May 19, 2023

| Jill Pais '05



BRISTOL, R.I. – Work hard and don’t be afraid to dream big – that’s the key to success in career and in life, Joyce and Bill Cummings told Roger Williams University graduates in their joint keynote address on Friday.

Both Joyce and Bill Cummings shared their stories of taking these lessons they learned from their own modest upbringings and applying them as a young married couple with a family. They

started out with very little, but they had a vision, worked hard, always gave back what they could to their communities, and grew more wealth than they could have dreamed.

As owners of one of the most successful real estate businesses in New England, Cummings Properties, they decided to channel their efforts into philanthropy. Joyce and Bill established Cummings Foundation in 1986, and it has become one of the largest private foundations in New England and has awarded grants of nearly half a billion dollars to local and global communities.

Quoting the former President of Liberia Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the world's first elected black female president and Africa's first elected female head of state, Joyce told the graduates, "The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them. If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough."

While the Class of 2023 will be heading into different directions – to graduate school, to doctorate programs, or to new careers or new directions in their careers – Bill urged the graduates to continue to be critical thinkers, collaborate as much as possible, demonstrate your ingenuity, and offer fresh ideas and energy to all efforts.

"No matter your path, all of you, I hope, are ready to bring essential and unique qualities to our society and to this great wide world of ours," said Bill Cummings.

Wherever their path takes them, the Cummings said, the graduates can be like Bill and embrace the philosophy of "starting small and making it big" – which is also the title of his story of entrepreneurial success – and also "find ways to enrich the world" and carry forth RWU's core values and commitment "to work with local and global communities to address problems that matter most to society."

"You, students, are the future leaders of the world. You need to be welcoming to all parts of the world and carry that core value with you as you leave these halls," said Joyce. Remember to "dream big dreams and work toward fulfilling them, even if it scares you."

RWU celebrated its 1,146 graduates in a university-wide Commencement ceremony on Friday, May 19, conferring 821 bachelor's degrees, 137 graduate degrees and 171 law degrees.

RWU President Ioannis Miaoulis told the graduates that their Roger Williams education has prepared them to follow their "life passion" and to lead thriving lives.

"You are now equipped with critical thinking skills, you know how to collect and interpret data, you have built your own designs with your own hands, you have performed and created beautiful works of art, and you have worked on real problems, real research and represented real clients. Use all of those skills and tools at your disposal to tackle what is next in your life," Miaoulis said.

But don't forget, he added, that their time at Roger Williams has also shown them the value of leadership and "to think and act beyond yourself."

“A Roger Williams education is a call to think beyond yourself and to use your education to make a difference in the world. We need you to think about the impact of your actions on others, the impacts of a business decision on the environment, the impact of a policy on marginalized individuals, the ability of a piece of art or artistic performance to bring joy and a sense of community and insight into society,” Miaoulis said. “Graduates of the Roger Williams University Class of 2023, now is your time to go forth into the world with confidence and resolve and make your mark on the world.”

Undergraduate student speaker [Dominion Emmanuel '23](#) spoke about the challenges he has faced as an immigrant and person of color, the racism and bias he confronted and his own doubts and feelings of not belonging that he has had to overcome. When he arrived at RWU, he became involved in and out of the classroom, joined clubs and worked as an orientation advisor, and cultivated “a community of students from diverse backgrounds.”

“For many of us, this is the time we use to find ourselves, our purpose, our friends and even our significant others. Waking up every day and going to school for all these years is not easy, but we’ve done it,” said Emmanuel, a Cultural Studies major and Legal Studies and Political Science double minor from Burlington, Mass.

At RWU, Emmanuel discovered his passion for becoming a lawyer and completed an internship at an immigration law firm in Washington, D.C. that inspired him to advocate for others and pursue a law degree and a career as an immigration attorney.

Emmanuel asked his fellow graduates: “What is your purpose? What are you meant to do? What if your purpose is not the same as your career? As you progress in this journey of life, I hope you discover your purpose and do things that make you happy.”

Graduate student speaker [Kelice Agosto M'23](#), who graduated with a Master’s in Forensic Mental Health Counseling, decided to change directions during her graduate studies and start her career following graduation, instead of pursue a doctorate degree. The Raleigh, N.C. resident, said that facing those challenges and taking on new experiences, both in her academic program and a rigorous internship with the Rhode Island State Psychiatric Hospital, helped her develop confidence in herself as a scholar and a professional.

“It is okay that you don’t have your entire life mapped out. Have faith in what lies ahead,” said Agosto, who has secured a position as a clinical therapist at the Massachusetts Treatment Center in Bridgewater, Mass. “You have overcome many challenges and will undoubtedly excel in all that you do.”

Singing his speech and strumming a guitar, law student speaker Jeff Prystowsky L’23 of Providence, R.I., serenaded his fellow graduates about his path from professional musician in the band, The Low Anthem, to law school graduate. While not every law student starts school in their mid-30s and balances studies with caring for two children under the age of four, Prystowsky noted that all RWU Law graduates can relate to having to juggle learning and adapting to the rigorous academic expectations, discovering exciting specialties (like intellectual property, for him), and gaining hands-on experience working with real clients in legal clinics.

“We all have stories. No matter what grade you got at the end, you learned how to speak lawyer, write lawyer, and be lawyers,” Prystowsky said. “You did it. I’m so proud of you.”

During the university ceremony, Roger Williams University celebrated leaders of the built environment and leaders of racial justice, equity and inclusion. RWU presented honorary degrees to Joyce and Bill Cummings, owners of Woburn-based Cummings Properties and founders of Cummings Foundation; to [Michael A. Cox](#), Boston Police Commissioner and Chief of the Boston Police Department; [Thomas F. Gilbane, Jr.](#), chairman and chief executive officer of Gilbane, Inc. and chairman of Gilbane Building Company; [Fred D. Gray, Esq.](#), a pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement; and [Justice Netti C. Vogel](#), retired Associate Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court. The School of Law Faculty of the Year Award was presented to John Chung, Professor of Law.

Fred Gray – a [trailblazing civil rights attorney](#) who won many battles in the struggle for equality and justice in America – delivered the Commencement address at the School of Law ceremony. An attorney in Alabama, Gray played a pivotal role in numerous Civil Rights moments, including representing Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. and leading many of the defining legal battles that dismantled segregation and Jim Crow laws.

“I used the law, and changed the law, always operating within the law,” said Gray, urging the RWU Law Class of 2023 to “find the wrongs that exist and correct them. Use your degree to make a difference.”

“You are graduating at a very crucial time in the history of America,” Gray said. Fight for justice and equity, and for what is right, he continued. “If we lose, it means that Dr. King, and all the others that have given their lives in the names of equal rights, have died in vain. If we lose, the nation will lose.”