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PASS THIS BLESSING ON

By J. Clay Smith, Jr.*

Dean (Oliver) Morse, Members of the law faculty, invited guests, parents, friends, and members of the graduating class of 1985, I am honored to brief this your last case.

The time has finally come to start your careers as prospective lawyers at the bar. You have earned your way through three difficult, and hopefully challenging, years in the portals of the Howard University School of Law.

These three years should have taught you more than the complex rules of Contracts, Torts, Pleadings and Crimes. These years were yours to learn about the capacity of your mind to adjust to pressures of life and to investigate the depth of your inner soul.

You will soon learn, if you have not already done so, that each of you are special to the universe in which you live. You are more special now that you were three years ago because you will soon be privileged to serve the public as a lawyer.

When you entered law school, I would wager that after the first week you doubted whether you would ever see this commencement day. Perhaps some of you doubted whether you would see this day two weeks ago. But, here you are -- ready to slip on the wedding band of the sacred public trust as lawyers.

During these years as students, you have been in a laboratory of preparation. Some of you have already decided -- perhaps too soon -- that you do

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not desire to practice law. You will leave here today spread to the winds. You will leave our legal laboratory. Some guidance is therefore in order because when you step away from this laboratory today, you will enter another -- one in which you will remain for the rest of your lives. However, should you choose to use the tools that you have learned here, remember that you represent 116 years of legal tradition; remember that you are of a movement that is much larger than the Class of 1985. Remember the efforts that were made made by your law teachers -- sometimes imperfectly -- to prepare you to lead your generation into the Twenty-First Century.

First, Honesty.

We urge you to be honest with the assets of your clients. You may never be a rich lawyer, but there is no poorer lawyer than one who has been found to be dishonest and untrustworthy. Your clients will often take their signal from you on questions of propriety. If they see you bend with the shiver of the wind, they may be mislead and will bend to impropriety also. However, if they see a strong and principled lawyer, one able to repel the invitation for purposeful irregularities, they may seek to emulate your strength and your abhorrence to shady business practices.

A lawyer never knows -- as a teacher never knows -- when a member of the public is waiting to be lead or taught about the perimeters of what is right or wrong. The robes that you wear today and the diploma that you will receive in hand today attest to our faith in you that you will never betray the trust of the public in our learned profession. Be honest.

Second, Believe In Yourself.

We urge you to believe in yourself. Timidity is a natural feeling for a new lawyer. However, so is the belief in one's ability. Take time to get to know who you are, and what you are. A lawyer, like any other professional charged with the responsibility of caring for people must be mindful of their frailties as human beings. It is the lack of recognition of one's limitations that is often our greatest malady. Believe in yourself, but make yourself, and your flaws, a lifetime study.

Third, Respect Others.

Respect others, even if others fail or are incapable of respecting you. Respect for your peers at the bar is critical as it will cause you never to underestimate your adversary. It is too easy not to respect your fellow man. However, you have learned here at this law school that your classmates -- many against great odds -- will walk across this platform today with you. They deserve, and they have earned, your respect.

Some of you will graduate with honors. You are to be congratulated. We laud your academic enterprise. However, all graduates will leave these grounds with honor today. All of you deserve respect; all of you must respect each other.

Fourth, Learn The Principles of Leadership.

The public looks to lawyers to be fair and just leaders. Why? You know the law; you possess the power of interpretation and the power to persuade and alter public opinion. Hence, you will be called upon and the people will come to depend on you to demonstrate that you can lead them with honor,

dignity and integrity. But remember, a good leader must also have the capacity to be a good and loyal follower. No leader is without flaws. Leaders need the help of those around them, and lawyers will often find themselves helping and holding the hand of the leader — even at times when the leader doesn't know he or she needs a helping hand.

Fifth, Prepare For Defeat.

The legal society in which you are entering as professionals loves winners. No one seems to love a loser. However, lawyers are born to win and to lose. You must prepare for both. Win with grace and lose with grace for there is always a tomorrow for winners to lose and losers to win. Our profession is one of advocacy, one of gentle men and gentle women, not one of barbarians. Praise your victors when you lose in the fray of legal contest for they will know that you are blessed with the rare gift of humility.

Sixth, Never Forget The Mission.

The mission of Howard Law School is broad and is often defined by the faculty in diverse ways. The mission was clear on January 6, 1869 when the law school first opened its doors. The mission of the law school was to educate Afro-Americans to enter the labor of law. For over a century, Howard Law School has educated Blacks, Whites and Hispanics. This mission has been ongoing for over a century. Our graduates have gone forth in the world and most of them have carried the mission of the law school to the world beyond. The mission of the law school has been defined, redefined by each graduate. But one thing is clear: the bulk of our graduates have

made a difference in the world. Our law graduates have changed the course of American law in virtually every state in the nation. Our graduates have preserved the rule of law -- and by their presence -- enhanced the moral basis upon which our constitutional democracy has been allowed to function. The Law Class of 1985 can do no less because history will judge the path that you take. The mission of the law school will be felt in the legal profession only to the extent that you enter the labor of law with a mind and a special commitment to make a difference. Never forget the mission of the law school which is now in your hands.

On May 9th, 1985 the Law Class of 1985 bestowed a significant gift on the law school. You gave a bust of Dr. Charles Hamilton Houston to the law school. Thank you for your generosity. Today, you will also honor Professor Herbert O. Reid, Sr., the distinguished Charles Hamilton Houston Professor of Law. Herbert Reid has exalted the mission of the law school as a law teacher for nearly half a century. You honor us all by recognizing him today, as well as the Hon. Luke Moore, the Hon. William Benson Bryant, Julian Dugas, and George Windsor, who teach the trial practice course.

Finally, Pass This Blessing On.

I close these remarks in the spirit of Ollie May Cooper for not enough attention has been given to the distinguished women who have been graduated from the law school. Ms. Cooper was the 13th woman to be graduated from the law school in 1921. I'm not going to give you a bibliographical sketch of her life. This is neither the time or place for that. I simply want to leave you with her words.

In the late 1970's, I interviewed Ms. Cooper. During that interview she informed me that she worked at the law school for forty (40) years. She served as secretary to ten (10) deans. She taught a course in legal research. Ms. Cooper died in Washington, D.C. on April 14, 1981 at the age of 94. (See, Ollie Cooper, 94 Dies, Taught at Howard U., Washington Post, April 17, 1981, at B5, col. 3; Smith, Ollie May Cooper, "The Real Dean" of the Howard University School of Law, 23 How. L.J. 365 (1980).

These are the words of Ms. Cooper's that I leave with you today.

I love Howard University School of Law because it gave me a chance to show that women could be lawyers, just as good as men. To Howard's credit it has admitted women to the school from the very beginning. . . .

There is one thing that I know: every law student -- whatever their gender or race that has completed Howard -- is blessed, and each student is obligated to pass this blessing on.

In the words of Ollie May Cooper: pass this blessing on; pass this blessing on.