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The Cause of Justice Is In Your Hands

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OFFICE OF THE DEAN
SCHOOL OF LAW

*Louis Rothschild Mehlinger
Class of 1921

"The Cause of Justice Is In Your Hands"*

By

J. Clay Smith, Jr.**
Dean

Howard University School of Law

Members of the law faculty, invited guests, parents, friends, and members of the graduating class of 1987, 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 than 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,

**Commencement remarks made on May 9, 1987, at the degree presentation ceremony at the Howard University School of Law.

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 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 118 years of legal tradition; remember that you are part of a movement that is much larger than the Class of 1987. Remember the efforts that were 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 misled 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 led 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, Look Back

You are now an alumni of the Howard University School of Law. When you leave these hallowed grounds today, you will not be forgotten or forsaken by your University or your law school. Howard University is your home. There will be more students coming behind you to seek a legal education at this law school. You must not forget those who will fill your seats, contest and support the policies of the faculty, publish the Law Review, run the Student Bar Association, pray with the Christian Fellowship, participate in the legal fraternities and the other student groups.

Don't forget to look back on your teachers as they struggle with new problems and a new generation of law students. Help us to maintain the highest standards of excellence. Help us to increase the value of the Howard experience.

And, when you can afford to, send the Law School a few dollars. We will welcome your generosity.

Seventh, 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 1987 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.

Finally, The Cause Of Justice

I want to close with a dedication to Louis Rothschild Mehlinger, the oldest living graduate of the Howard University School of Law. Mr. Mehlinger is 104 years old. He was graduated from the law school, magna cum laude, in 1921. There are not many here who will live to be an alumnus of the School for 81 years.

In 1982 Mr. Meghlinger celebrated his 100th birthday in the James A. Cobb Moot Court Room. During his remarks he told the students:

"I wonder whether the students really understand the great changes that have taken place at Howard Law School since [1921]. You have advantages that I didn't have. At this School you have values that are untold and unmeasured and I hope you make the best of it."

Louis Rothschild Mehlinger's words provide you with a blueprint for your future: Make the best of it. Make the best of your life. Don't be just somebody. Be somebody! You, each of you, hold within your mind the values that Mr. Mehlinger spoke of in 1982. Don't surrender those values to greed. Mass those values for the cause of justice; use the legal knowledge acquired at Howard Law School to assure that the Constitution -- now two hundred years of age -- will eliminate the remaining vestiges of discrimination in the new century.

Louis Rothschild Mehlinger has asked me to tell you that the future of a just America, an equal America, a compassionate America, an America that must make room for Black and disadvantaged America is in your hands. Its in your hands. Look at your hands. The cause of justice is in your hands.***

***As fate would have it, Louis Rothschild Mehlinger died on May 10, 1987. Whitaker, Louis Rothschild Mehlinger, D.C. Lawyer, Dies at 104, Wash. Post, May 14, 1987, at D6, col. 1; Louis R. Mehlinger, 104 lawyer, Wash. Times, May 15, 1987, at 13B, col. 4; Howard U. law school graduate dies at 104, Wash. Afro-American, May 16,, 1987, at 1, col. 5. Prior to his funeral on May 15, 1987, Mr. Mehlinger was brought to the Chapel at the Law School where his friends gathered to pay their final respects.