

UVA LAW | Orientation Address by Sen. Jennifer McClellan '97

**JENNIFER
MCCLELLAN:**

First and foremost, I want to congratulate you for all of your accomplishments that led you here today. And for everyone, congratulate you and everyone who helped you get here. Second, I want to echo something that you already heard from Ashley and Catherine about the community that you're enduring and the lifelong friendships that you will make, especially among your small sections and your professors. This is a community. This is not just law school. This is your life. And you will make lifelong friendships that even when years go by and you pick up the phone, or text, or reach out through Zoom, it's as if you've been with each other the entire time.

And I've found that each moment in my life as I've begun a new chapter, the friends that I have made at UVA have been there right along with me. We've already acknowledged that today is not the way that you thought it would look. This orientation is like nothing before. And it seems cliché now to say that we are in unprecedented times.

I've actually been thinking a lot during this pandemic about my parents, who were part of the silent generation, who grew up during the depression, during World War II, during the Civil rights movement, and saw many unprecedented times through their life. But what that taught them was resiliency. And what this is going to teach you is the same.

It is precisely for that reason that I wanted to be with you here today to give you a few words of advice as you enter this new chapter in your life, because these are strange and troubling times, but they're also incredibly important. This is an incredibly important turning point for our nation and for our commonwealth. And it is a time when we will particularly need the skills that you are going to learn here in law school. Because I'm going to let you in on a little secret, you're not here to learn the law. You're here to hear a new way of thinking. You are here to learn how to take everything that has come before you-- court decisions, laws-- take that and apply it to new fact patterns, new situations to solve problems for people and institutions. You are here to learn how to adapt. And that skill is going to be more important now than ever before because the impact of the coronavirus and the associated economic crisis and the reckoning with racial injustice, and frankly, a growing lack

of faith among people, among all of our institutions, you are going to need the skills to adapt.

Because trends that we're coming already before now, but probably weren't going to be here for five or 10 years, are now here. In government, in health care, in education, in the environment, in real estate, transportation, our criminal justice system, you name it, you name the system, you name the institution, and they're going to have to change in ways seen and unforeseen. And they all need lawyers. And frankly, lawyers are very good at helping to adapt new situations and help navigate going forward. But we have to do that in a way, we have to adapt to our new reality, and you have to help us adapt to our new reality in ways that are consistent with the core values of our constitution, balancing liberty with responsibility.

So what I want to share with you this morning is not so much what you need to enter the bar. And again, everything I went through you will need to enter the bar and your career. But I also want to give you a little bit of advice to keep in mind while you are in law school.

First, 2020 has taught us like nothing else that life is what happens when you're busy making other plans. Again, Dean Golubuff alluded to this in her own experience. And it was certainly mine. 26 years ago I sat where you sat. I decided I wanted to be a lawyer because I knew I wanted to be involved in government. Based on a love of history, my parents own life experiences, I came to believe government could be a powerful force for change and solving people's problems. And lawyers were always a part of that.

But when I was sitting where you were sitting, I wanted to work for a congressional committee, preferably the Senate Judiciary Committee. That was my plan. Something happened in the middle, though.

About a year after before my first summer, there was a majority change in Congress. And I didn't want to work for the new majority. So I went to a law firm instead.

And then I saw that a law firm and the practice of law in different ways could also affect change. So I planned, you know, I'm going to make partner, I'm going to get

married, I'm going to have kids. And then maybe one day I'll run for office. But in the meantime, I'm going to work to effect change both through the law and in my community.

Then I was offered an opportunity to go in-house at Verizon. And I accepted it, because I saw you know what, corporate America can be a force for change. But you need the right people, especially in the C-suite. So I thought I'll work really hard, I will get a promotion, I'll get married, I'll have kids, I'll retire. And then maybe one day I'll run for office. But an opportunity presented itself when Viola Baskerville, who was my delegate at the time, ran for lieutenant governor. And a lot of my friends started asking me, are you going to run for office?

And the more I thought about it, I said you know what I want to be the one making change, writing the laws, debating them on the floor. And not just electing other people to do it. And so I ran, and I won, and I have been effecting change through government a lot earlier than I ever thought in a different way than I ever thought that I would. And so that's the first bit of advice I have for you is to be flexible. It's important to have a goal. But life is what happens when you're trying to achieve that goal. You have to be willing and able to recognize opportunities that come your way and take them, even if it's not what you exactly think you're going to do. It could open up an entirely new opportunity and rewarding experience that you never dreamed of before.

The second piece of advice I have is kind of strange to hear on your first day of law school. And that is don't be afraid to fail. Don't be afraid to fail. Again, my interest in the law was sparked by people who sometimes failed epically, but pick themselves up and learned from their mistakes and moved on. And you are going to need that skill.

It's the key principle for the scientific method, which again, probably sounds weird for me to be talking about for a law school orientation. But every failure in life, whether it's when you first fell when you were learning how to walk, every failure in life is a lesson that you can learn from that prepares you, that makes you stronger for the next lesson in life. And history is full of people-- full of people who fail, pick themselves up, moved on, and succeeded even greater than their wildest dreams. And so you have to be willing to fail.

And finally, I want to say my last lesson for you is actually from my five-year-old daughter. When coronavirus started, you know, it was tough for everybody-- for everybody. All of our plans were upended. All of us were isolated. But my daughter, who not surprisingly, has spent a lot of time thinking about being a YouTube star and watching other kids on YouTube, grabbed my phone one day and made a little video that she expected me to post on YouTube, where she said get some joy in there. Get some joy in there, because life is going to be hard, work is going to be hard, law school is going to be hard. You are going to find moments where you say, I just can't do this.

You're going to have moments when you say, my best isn't good enough. You're going to have moments where you say, that wasn't fair. But when you take the time to get some joy in there, it gets you through those tough times. Don't take yourself so seriously that you can't have fun. Some of the hardest times I had were in law school. Some of the most joyous times I had were in law school. All of them helped make me the well-rounded person and the well-rounded lawyer that I am today.

Because at the end of the day, you need to ask yourself a couple of questions. You're sitting here today, some of you probably planning out every moment of your life, every moment of your career. There are going to be twists and turns. At the end of the day, even in the hardest moment-- and I've had these moments in the past five months-- ask yourself at the end of your life when you look back at the total of your life, were those hard moments what defined you or was it the technicality of your life? Think about on your deathbed, what is the legacy you want to leave behind?

And if you keep that as your north star, if you keep that as your guiding principle, then the tough moments won't seem as tough. Coronavirus and the pandemic we are in right now are just a blip in the overall scheme of things. And I end where I began with my parents. Not all of us will be blessed with long life. But my father lived to be 88. My mother is about to turn 88.

And the toughest times they faced through the depression, through World War II, in the grand scheme of things helped build the character of who they were. But was only a blip in their lives. And now as all of us wonder what is the job market going to

look like when we come out? And this tough moment of how do I get through the isolation that I sometimes feel when I'm in quarantine, how do I get through a schooling, a life, a situation that doesn't look like what I expected it to?

Remember the totality of what you want your life and legacy to be. Learn from your mistakes. And recognize your opportunities, pick yourself up, and press forward. But most importantly, get some joy in there while you're doing it. So have fun in the next three years. And I can't wait to see what you do when you earn your degree from UVA Law School. Thank you all for having me.