

LINDA HOWARD: Frances, thank you for that very generous introduction. Dean Goluboff, members of the faculty, family, and friends, and of course, members of the graduating class, good afternoon.

It is such an honor to be with you. I'm going to share three stories about my journey to law school and some of what I've learned since law school, and a little bit about what has had me stop and really think about myself and about the world.

I was born in Richmond, Virginia, in Richmond Community Hospital, which at the time, was the only black-owned hospital in the city. It was also the only hospital that had black doctors on staff. My father told me years later that he chose that particular hospital because my mother would be addressed as Mrs. Howard and not by her first name.

I grew up in the village of Ettrick, Virginia. There really is a plaque as you come into town, Village of Ettrick, a small community that surrounds Virginia State University. It was then officially known as Virginia State College for Negroes, a historically black college near Petersburg, Virginia, where my father was chairman of the Biology Department and my mother was a math professor.

As an infant, I was christened in the college chapel. The chapel also served as the auditorium for the elementary school band's concerts. I played the clarinet. And it served as the theater where we watched movies on Saturday night. And it hosted such visiting performers as the Joffrey Ballet and Duke Ellington and his band.

The nursery school I attended was operated by the college's early childhood development department. And my elementary school was operated by the college's Education Department. The faculty and students taught us French, music, and modern dance after school and in the

summers. It was an all-black, culturally rich, and carefully managed enclave that sheltered its children as best it could from the indignities and cruelties of the outside world.

The Civil Rights Movement was a subject of conversation and action by the time I was in kindergarten. One day I asked my mother about a word I had heard and I didn't understand. I asked her, mom, what's integration? And she said, you know when I make scrambled eggs for breakfast, when I break the egg into the bowl, the white part and the yellow part are separate? That's segregation. Then when I take the fork and I beat up the egg, the white part and the yellow part are all mixed together, that's integration. Thanks, I said, and ran off to play.

Social integration came for me when I was 13 years old. I left my insular segregated community and enrolled in a wonderful boarding school in Massachusetts that was devoted to the principles of International brotherhood and world peace. I met students from all over the world, Africa, Hong Kong, Europe, South America, and of course, the United States.

The United Nations flag flew at the entry to our school grounds. And in the lobby of our school building in words one foot high were the words "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," from Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights I read those words every day for three years. They became real for me. and at the same time, I was learning in class and out of class that there was work to be done for all human beings to be free and equal in dignity and rights.

When I finally had my law degree in my hands, as you sit here anticipating in this moment, I was excited to embark on a great adventure. I wanted to make policy, make sure people are included in the benefits

and opportunities of our society, to serve where I could be at work fulfilling the promise of freedom and equality and dignity for all human beings and to support others to do the same.

I have been blessed with unbelievable opportunities to engage with what I was up to in life, and when I was smart enough to do so, I grabbed them. One such opportunity came when I was sponsored by the United States government to travel to Japan and India to deliver a series of talks on civil rights law in the United States.

During a discussion with the board of trustees of Kyoto university in Kyoto, Japan, I criticized our government's effectiveness in achieving gender and racial equality in a number of areas. The university board chairman said, I think President Reagan must be very foolish to send you here as a representative. I replied, thank you, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate your view. The

United States is open to diverse points of view, even when they are critical of the government. It is fundamental to our strength as a nation.

That trip and that experience were the beginning of a new appreciation on my part for the miracle the United States is, for the rights we have as citizens, and for the rights we have to fight for new rights and to speak our views freely. I returned home with a new awareness of the promise for people that America represents for the world.

Soon after that trip, I moved to New York City. I thought on some level that what it meant to be a New York lawyer-- Frances-- what I thought was that to be a New York lawyer was to be right about everything all the time. I thought I was pretty smart, but I knew I wasn't that smart. I was terrified. Then I discovered I didn't have to be right all the time. That discovery rocked my world and changed everything for me.

I was in a conference room instructing a group of executives seated around the conference table about their obligations under a labor contract. I started to read out loud the critical paragraph of the contract. Midway through reading I realized I was reading the wrong paragraph. I was horrified and embarrassed. I looked up and I said to the group, I am so sorry, but this is the wrong paragraph.

One of the executives said, you know, you could have kept reading. No one here would've known the difference. Everyone laughed. They laughed so hard that some of them had tears rolling down their cheeks. When the meeting was over I followed the president into her office to apologize for my mistake. She turned to me and she said, that was great! I want every presentation that you make to be just like that one. I said, but I made a horrible mistake, I protested. She said, they had fun. They never have fun at these meetings. I want your presentations to be just like that one.

In that moment, I had to reconsider everything I knew about work, life, and doing a good job. It was disorienting to discover that my mistake was not a bad thing. If my job is not to be right all the time, I asked myself, what is my job? I changed my concern from, I have to be perfect, to my job is to be of service. I created my job to be the best lawyer I can be in service of the mission and the people of the institution.

In partnership with our president, I created a world-class affirmative action program that dramatically increased our number of professors of color, and I drafted the organization's first sexual harassment policy. It was a groundbreaking program that gave people real access to

sexual harassment policy. It was a groundbreaking program that gave people real access to having their complaints heard and remedied.

Your views of yourself, of your work, of people of the world will be challenged. You may find yourself disoriented and wondering what happened to life as you understood it. My invitation to you is to stand for something that is important to you, something bigger than yourself and bigger than your own comfort and your own personal success and gratification.

Standing for something being possible is very powerful. Standing for something being possible is different from being wedded to a point of view. It includes speaking up for something, acting in the direction of something, and inviting others to participate in causing something. It also includes listening to others. Standing for something that allows you to deal with challenges to your point of view and your beliefs.

I'm now going to address who you are today. Who you are today has been forged by this remarkable crucible of rigor, investigation, challenge, communication, and discovery. What has happened in this place is extraordinary. You are not, as both the dean and Frances have said, the same person who started this journey three years ago.

You are leaving this place with distinctions, ways of thinking, resources, relationships that give you power and a whole range of arenas. You are not merely prepared, you are prepared to impact the world in ways that you cannot even imagine now. You're also not the same group that you were three years ago.

Who you are together and for each other has altered, and it does not have to end here. I call on you to discover and create who you are. Together you will make the law, enforce the law, interpret the law, apply the law, write the law, teach, argue and question the law, challenge the law, expand what is possible with the law, and recognize the limits of the law.

Together, together you will lead your communities, develop your communities, inspire your communities, rebuild your communities, connect your communities, and re-envision your communities.

Among you there are legislators, judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, law firm partners, litigators, law professors, community leaders, CEOs, entrepreneurs, mayors, governors, ambassadors, possibly even a United States president.

I call on you to create an ongoing life for the Class of 2019. A life in which any one of you speaks for all of you, in which you stand for the success of each of you, and in which you call on each other to be magnificent and powerful. It is possible for you together to be a formidable power for justice for all people, or for whatever you say.

Individually, you are the best and the brightest. Together you are magnificent. Members of the Class of 2019, I request that you turn to a classmate next to you and take a moment to appreciate the magnificence of your classmate.

Turn to a classmate, turn to a classmate. Be present to the magnificence. And anyone on the-

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. Now please express your appreciation for the faculty who have stood for you and fought for you for these three years. Please stand and appreciate your faculty.

[APPLAUSE, CHEERING]

Thank you. To conclude, expect your views, beliefs, and logic to be challenged. Second, stand for something that is important to you that is bigger than yourself. A stand will allow you to examine your views, beliefs, and logic with no diminution of who you are. Third, you are the magnificent Class of 2019. I call on you together to create yourselves as a force to be reckoned with. I salute you. I honor you. Congratulations.

[APPLAUSE]