Commencement 2016: Words of Challenge as Graduates Cross A Threshold

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the most exclusive organizations honoring outstanding trial lawyers, including the International Academy of Trial Lawyers and American College of Trial Lawyers.

Marianne Mariano ’94, a former courtroom lawyer who serves as Federal Public Defender for the Western District of New York, and the first woman to head a federal public defender’s office in the Second Circuit.

Teresa A. Miller, a Harvard Law School graduate and longtime UB Law professor, now UB’s vice provost for equity and inclusion, who is an expert on prisons, immigration and prisoners’ rights.

Hon. Erin Peradotto ’84, an accomplished trial and appellate lawyer, former head of the New York attorney general’s office in Buffalo, and now justice of the New York State Supreme Court Appellate Division, Fourth Department.

Hon. Eugene F. Pigott Jr. ’73, now senior associate judge of the Court of Appeals, New York State’s highest court, following a distinguished career as a trial attorney, Erie County Attorney in Western New York, New York State Supreme Court Justice, and Presiding Justice of the New York State Supreme Court, Appellate Division, Fourth Department.

Barry Scheck, a partner with Neufeld, Scheck and Brustin in New York City, co-founder of the Innocence Project at Cardozo Law School, which has exonerated approximately 300 people, and a key member of the “Dream Team” that defended O.J. Simpson. Scheck is renowned for his eight-day cross-examination and his part in the summation in that trial.

Christopher Viapiano, a partner with the Washington, D.C., law firm Sullivan & Cromwell, whose practice includes complex antitrust, commodities, securities and shareholder derivative litigation.

Judge Richard Wesley, a former trial attorney in private practice who served in the New York State Legislature and on the New York State bench (Supreme Court, Appellate Division and Court of Appeals) before becoming a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals, Second Circuit.

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No one gets through law school without a cheering section, and as 200 students received their degrees at SUNY Buffalo School of Law’s 127th Commencement ceremonies, their families and friends did plenty of cheering.

At the May 21 ceremonies, held in the auditorium of UB’s Center for the Arts, 188 J.D. candidates and 12 master of laws candidates crossed the stage as degrees were conferred — and crossed the threshold of their new life as lawyers.

Interim Dean James A. Gardner welcomed the crowd and had some parting words for the Class of 2016. (See Message from the Interim Dean on page 1.)

The afternoon’s keynote speaker, Robert Odawi Porter, is the former president, attorney general and chief legal counsel of the Seneca Nation of Indians. Porter shared some hard-learned lessons about life in the law, encouraging the graduates to think beyond the narrow interests of their careers.

He asked each of them to consider their profession a “personal journey.””From this day forward,” he said, “it will become increasingly meaningless how well you did here in the Law School as a student. What will matter is whether you’re any good as a lawyer and whether you’re any good as a person.”

Porter also counseled a careful balance between the pursuit of a high salary and the higher calling of the law. “I don’t think there’s any shame in wanting to improve your economic situation,” he said. “But as lawyers we exist to serve our clients. Money is a consequence of some success in the legal profession, but it is not the objective.”

Finally, he encouraged the graduates to be engaged in their community. “Serve on the school board. Raise money for a charity. Teach a kid how to read. Run for Congress. Whatever you do, it will not only help your legal career, it will make you a better person.”

The student address was given by Ibrahim Tariq, who recounted a moment in Associate Professor Matthew Stilens’s classroom when Stilens — explaining a concept in constitutional law — paused and said, “We’re lawyers. We run this.”

“And he was right,” Tariq said. “We run our society. We know what the law says, but it’s our duty to argue about what the law should mean.” He encouraged his classmates: “Let’s not change the way we fight. Let’s not change the way we argue. Let’s fight civil, let’s argue clean. And let’s not play a part in a spiral down into rancor and animosity. After all, we run this. Let’s run it well.”

An emotional Professor Charles Patrick Ewing presented the Ken Joyce Excellence in Teaching Award posthumously to John R. Nuchereno, who passed away during the first year of the Innocence and Justice Project he was instrumental in creating. Catherine E. Nagel ’98 accepted the award on behalf of her husband and law partner.