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Commencement 2015

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Commencement 2015

Find an issue and pursue it, new graduates are urged

The pomp was in full swing and the circumstance was celebratory at SUNY Buffalo Law School's 126th Commencement ceremonies. Two hundred and nine degrees – both master of laws and Juris Doctor – were conferred in the May 23 ceremony, which took place in the jam-packed Center for the Arts.

In SUNY Distinguished Professor **James A. Gardner's** first Commencement as interim dean, he brought greetings from the faculty and, for the graduates, thoughts on the critical skill of exercising judgment in professional and personal life.

"It seems today as if the institution of judgment itself is under siege," Gardner said. "People seem reluctant to exercise their trust in their independent judgment, and instead are fascinated with what other people think and approve of." This "outsourcing of personal judgment," he said, shows itself in the metrics of social media "likes," web page hits and page views, and attention to what is trending on Twitter. "A brute and reductionist popularity seems to replace personal judgment as the basis for decision-making," he said.

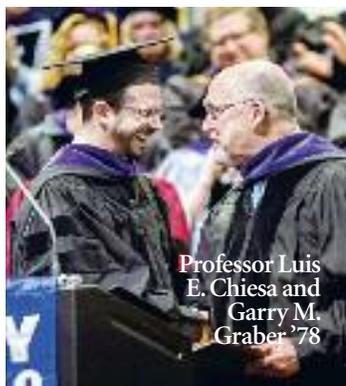
He encouraged the graduates to exercise their own judgment – to "think less about what is offered and more about what is not provided for our consumption, and why not. This might tell an interesting story about power."

The good news, Gardner said, is that graduates "should be well-positioned to navigate this strange world. This law school strives mightily to produce graduates who are skilled critical thinkers. It's up to you to decide when the judgment and approval of others matters – and when it decidedly does not."

After greetings from University **Provost Dr. Charles F. Zukoski**, Gardner introduced the afternoon's keynote



Eric T. Schneiderman,
New York State's
attorney general



Professor Luis
E. Chiesa and
Garry M.
Grabert '78



Rachael Pelletter '15
and interim Dean
James A. Gardner

speaker: **Eric T. Schneiderman**, New York State's attorney general.

Schneiderman's remarks spoke to the role of lawyers in the grand experiment of American democracy, one that he said continues to grow. "You, my new colleagues, are not just practitioners," he said. "You are the guardians of a legal system and a nation based on the principle that we are a nation of laws, not men. It's your job as lawyers to oversee that system and guide it forward, because the law is always evolving."

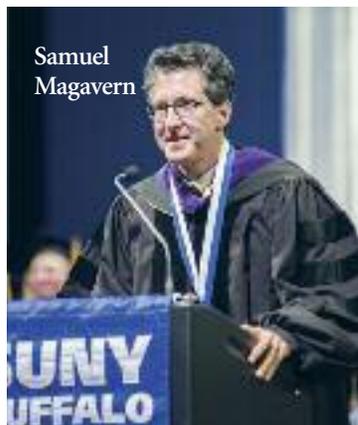
The arc of history, he said, bends toward a continual expansion of the Constitution's emphasis on "we the people" – "the quintessentially American idea of

equal justice under the law, which was an extraordinarily radical idea. All of American history supports the notion that our national mission is to make these words ever more true."

Schneiderman cited a succession of New York lawyers who have been part of that progression, from the abolitionist movement in the 19th century, to women's suffrage in the early 20th century and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. And he challenged the graduates to find a cause to champion. "There are people here," he said, "who will be leaders in the evolution of the law in important political and legal movements."

As an example he held up Winifred

To view photos and video highlights of our Commencement ceremony, visit www.law.buffalo.edu/forum/extra



Samuel Magavern



Class of '65, left to right: Sheldon Evans, Hon. Anthony P. LoRusso, Hon. Leslie G. Foschio, George B. Weires and Eric Corbett Williams



Above left: Corey S. Chapin and Aaron Fishkin, who gave the student address

Above: Emily G. Riordan and Jillian E. Nowak

Left: Jamila A. Lee poses for a photo.

Stanley, a 1933 graduate of the University of Buffalo Law School. As a brand-new graduate, he said, Stanley took on the cause of changing the law that barred women from sitting on juries – organizing church societies, women’s clubs and political organizations, and ultimately prevailing. She went on to win election to Congress in 1942, and introduced the first equal pay legislation in that body.

Robert P. Heary '91, president-elect of the SUNY Buffalo Law Alumni Association, encouraged the new graduates to stay connected to each other and to their school, saying, “The friendships you have made during your time at the

Law School and the connections you will make will be key to your professional success and will sustain you in your career.”

The student address was given by **Aaron Fishkin '15**, who spoke of some doubts along the way. “Does the world really need more lawyers?” he asked. “I learned the answer to that question last summer.” During an internship with a district attorney’s office, he listened as the defendant in a criminal case – a smart, career-oriented soldier charged with assaulting a bar bouncer – gave his side of the story. The prosecutor asked Fishkin privately, “What would you do here?”

“I thought about the man I had just met,” he said. “This articulate, well-dressed, towering figure; this young man who seemed friendly and harmless; a man serving our country with so much at stake. A young man with no prior convictions but who stood accused of committing a violent assault. Then it hit me – this is what being a lawyer is all about. It’s not about the prestige. It’s not about the money. It’s about ensuring that justice is served. It’s about keeping an open mind and listening. It’s about making a difference and using the law to make a difference.

“We will all face a situation where someone’s life is in our hands,” Fishkin said. “As lawyers we will be entrusted with tremendous discretion and responsibility to make tough, life-altering decisions. We won’t know all the answers, but our diversity of experiences and our passion for doing the right thing will guide us. That’s what it means to be a lawyer – being brave enough to make the hard decisions and vowing to do the right thing.”

Commencement is also a time for honoring achievement. The Dean’s Medal, which recognizes individuals who have distinguished themselves by their commitment to justice and the rule of law, was presented to **Samuel Magavern**, a Law School adjunct professor and principal of the social justice organization Partnership for the Public Good. The Ken Joyce Excellence in Teaching Award went to **Garry M. Graber '78**, whose courses in corporate reorganization in bankruptcy have been popular despite their specialized nature.

Also honored were student **Benjamin Nelson**, with the Max Koren Award for scholastic achievement; **Thomas C. Katsiotas** and **Amat Fatimah**, with the John N. Bennett Achievement Award; and **Rachael M. Pelletter**, with the Dale S. Margulis Award for contributions to the Law School and the community.

This year’s faculty award went to **Professor Rick Su**, and the staff award to **Marc Davies**, associate director for career services.

Dean Gardner also noted the retirements of eight faculty members and paid special tribute to clinical **Professor George M. Hezel**, longtime director of the school’s Affordable Housing and Community Development Clinic.