

Juris Doctor Class of 2021 Valedictorian Address

By Lidet Getachew

Although I wish I could be seeing all of your faces today, I am very grateful that I did not have to do this in person as I would have probably been sobbing through the whole thing and not one of you deserve that.

I would first like to start by acknowledging that we obtained our Juris Doctor from the University of Manitoba Faculty of Law whose campus is located on the original lands of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene peoples, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation. I would like to acknowledge the Treaties that were made on these territories, as well as the mistakes and harms of the past, and those continuing today

I would also like to selfishly take this opportunity to give thanks to my parents, Dematros and Fethia, who have sacrificed immensely to give my siblings and I the kind of future they were never afforded. I owe this degree and everything I ever accomplish in my life to you.

My dearest fellow graduates, I am honoured to stand here as the valedictorian for our graduating class of 2021. What an incredible journey this has been and what an especially strange end to our law school career having completed exactly one half of our degree through remote learning.

I'm not sure if you'll recognize this building behind me as it has surely been a very long time since any of us have been allowed to gather here.

It is very kind of the University of Manitoba to allow me to record my speech on the premises so as to provide us some sort of closure and to allow me one more opportunity to encounter the aggressive geese who rule this place.

If you're having difficulty remembering this place, I'd like to remind you of some good times that have really stuck out to me.

It was in this building where we all sat nervously together in the moot court room on that beautiful September day in 2018 and were reminded, we were NOT Beyonce.

It was in this building where we sat in our section classrooms and took a blood oath vowing to protect the honour of our section to the death- or that might have actually just been A01?

It was in this building where we spent countless hours studying TORTS or admin law, or preparing for the mini moot, glaring at SNAILS for spreading out their bio-chem textbooks and taking up all the good spots in the library, where we consumed countless boxes of domino's pizza, and spent one entire evening freaking out about a missing door stop.

It was in this building where our class was often shushed for being too loud in the hallways after an exam before ultimately deciding to take the celebration over to the Hub for our traditional post exam drinks.

Where we forged lifelong friendships based on mutual interests in different areas of law, interest in a particular intermural sport or our shared lived experiences and unique circumstances as members of the BIPOC, LGBTQ2S+ communities, or students with disabilities.

On our first day of school, we learned of the many accomplishments of our fellow classmates and our unique journeys to law school. We were told that among us, we had an Engineer, a Dentist, an Opera singer, and a Museum curator just to name a few.

We also had among us individuals who have had to overcome various obstacles in their lives in order to study at Robson Hall. The various perspectives acquired as a result of these life circumstances undoubtedly enriched our entire law school experience through interesting discussions and opportunities to learn from one another.

In preparation for this speech, I reached out to some of my fellow classmates to ask about what their favourite and least favourite aspects of law school were. After receiving their responses, I tried to envision the law school experience from the different perspectives of my fellow graduates.

I thought about my indigenous classmates who are confronted on a daily basis with the systemic barriers and oppressions encountered by not only their community members who come in contact with the justice system but also the students themselves as they pursue a career in the legal profession. I thought of my classmates who have school aged children but somehow came to each class more prepared than most. When I think of these situations experienced by my fellow graduates, I am in awe of all that we have been able to accomplish during our time at Robson Hall.

Throughout the past 3 years, we've done a little bit of learning, a little bit of growing, and a whole lot of partying. Our law school education took some of us on amazing trips around the world to participate in international courses, to represent our school at the law games competition, or to attend the annual hockey tournament in grand forks.

A lot of these events and experience would not have been possible without the exceptional faculty and staff at Robson Hall. You have supported and facilitated that “little bit of learning” and “little bit of growing” I referenced earlier. You have served as mentors, impromptu shoulders to cry on, and even provided many of us with an employment opportunity and served as sources of income. Thank you for preparing us for the next chapter of our lives and opening our eyes to the various opportunities made possible by obtaining a law degree.

To our families, friends, significant others, children, and roommates who have provided so much support and encouragement as we navigated our way through this challenging but rewarding journey, thank you for sticking by our sides. Thank you for laughing at our annoying law jokes, for putting up with our tempers during finals, for stressing out along with us during articling

recruits, and for being understanding as we cancelled plans, missed dinners, school concerts and recitals.

In reflecting on what is going on around the world today, it is very easy to lose hope in the future. We are still experiencing the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic which continues to disproportionately affect marginalized communities. We recently passed the one-year anniversary of George Floyd's murder, which prompted global racial justice protests and the black lives matter movement. Across the country, more and more mass graves are being discovered at former residential schools. These findings once again highlight the horrific treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and remind us of the ongoing impacts of the residential school system.

When I consider all of these realities, I'm also reminded of the individuals in this graduating class who consistently strive to make positive contributions to society with a view of a better future. My incredible classmates who are raising a charter challenge to address excessive penalties imposed on their legal aid clients, my classmates who volunteer countless hours at Welcome Place assisting refugee claimants with their bases of claims as they settle in Canada, and the individuals who dedicated so much of their time working at the law clinic assisting community members navigate the legal system just to name a few.

This gives me hope for a better future that addresses present injustices and systemic issues. There is no one better suited to address these issues within the legal realm than members of this graduating class.

I could go on and on about what makes this graduating class special, but I think UofM parking is about to make another dent in my student line of credit, so I'll wrap this up quickly...

My dearest fellow graduates, it has been an honor to be your class valedictorian. more so, it has been an incredible honor to learn among you and I cannot wait to see the amazing things you accomplish in this world.

Thank you.