

Lessons Learned as a Lawyer — and in Life
Stetson University College of Law Commencement Address
Remarks Delivered by USF President Rhea Law
May 18, 2024

Good morning! Before I get started, I must tell you that it makes me so proud to see so many future lawyers earning their degrees today from Stetson Law. Can we take a moment to give the Class of 2024 another rousing round of applause?

Thank you! It is truly an honor to be invited to speak to the graduating class and to be presented with an honorary Doctor of Laws. I am sincerely grateful to Dean Benjamin Barros and the Stetson University College of Law for this incredible recognition.

I have had a lot of mentors, champions, and friends who have helped me and supported me along the way, and I would be remiss if I did not thank the faculty and staff of Stetson University College of Law for their care and support, not only during my 2.5 years here, but after graduation as well.

And of course, a special thanks to my dear husband Wayne, who has supported me every day throughout our nearly 40 years of marriage. He and I met while I was in law school. It was on my daily commute across the Howard Franklin Bridge that he and I crossed paths for the very first time. So, in a way, you could say it was because of Stetson that we have been fortunate to share our lives together.

My Stetson education has served me well, and during my years leading my law firm, I could honestly attest to the fact that Stetson lawyers were always well-prepared for the rigors of law firm practice. You have chosen well by attending Stetson University. I am confident your future is bright!

Stetson has provided you with a firm foundation for your future. As you embark on this next chapter, I encourage you to remember your “why.”

For me, I became a lawyer because I wanted to help people. While studying at the University of South Florida, I took a course in business law, and through a

project where I had to analyze and make recommendations to assist a local business. I realized I had found my “why.” It was exhilarating to see that I had positively impacted that business, and I realized that becoming a lawyer would allow me to continue impacting and giving back to my community.

I chose Stetson Law because of the significant role this institution has played in our region for generations. This is not only Florida’s first law school, it is enlightened. It is the first law school in the state to admit women and the first to require pro bono service by its students and its faculty. As a lifelong Tampa Bay resident and fifth-generation Floridian, I could not think of a better place to study law than right here at Stetson University.

Throughout my legal career, I have learned a lot of lessons — and today, I want to share three of those lessons with all of you.

My career was defined by many firsts, one of the biggest being that I was a first-generation college student. No one expected me to attend college, and certainly not law school. But I wanted to do it for myself.

And that is the first lesson I want to share with you. Believe in yourself, and always bet on yourself.

To help pay for my bachelor’s degree, I worked for USF as a research project administrator. I wore both hats for nearly a decade — and by that time, my retirement fund had vested, so I decided to cash it out to cover my law school tuition. It took a big leap of faith to make that choice, but I was determined to take this next step for my future.

By that point, I had overcome all the obvious obstacles standing in my way. I passed the LSAT, I was admitted to Stetson Law, and my tuition was covered. However, as orientation approached, I realized that I would be older and at a different stage of life than many of my peers, and I was not sure if that was another challenge I would have to navigate.

As any good lawyer would do, I decided to do some research. I called up the Dean of the College of Law, Richard Dillon, and he said, “Come see me during orientation because there is someone who I want you to meet.”

To assuage my concerns, he introduced me to a woman who was in her 70s and already enrolled at Stetson Law. I asked her, “Why are you doing this now?” and she said to me, “Because I realized that with this degree, I can make a difference by helping people in my community.”

I thought that if she could do this — I could, too. And it was that mindset, that desire to embrace the unknown, that led me toward many other opportunities throughout my career.

That brings me to the second lesson — always be open to new opportunities.

I had prepared myself to focus on tax law because I was told it was the specialization that was the most in-demand at the time. But then the senior partner at the first law firm I worked for — his name was Clint Brown — asked if I knew anything about chemistry because they needed a lawyer to help do environmental permitting for a phosphate company the firm recently took on as a client.

I was able to help that client because as luck would have it... when I first started college, I initially set my sights on becoming a doctor, and chemistry was one of the fields I studied before changing majors. This led to environment & land use becoming one of my main areas of practice, and it also served as a reminder to stay open to any opportunities that may present themselves along the way.

As a land-use attorney, I worked on major mixed-use, residential, commercial, and industrial projects across the state, many of them here in the Tampa Bay region, such as the Port of Tampa, and local mixed-use projects like Tampa Palms, Westchase, FishHawk, and other commercial developments. These projects required a legal prowess in environmental regulatory law but also a deep understanding of public policy implications of government law.

One of my favorite clients was a visionary who constantly focused on enhancing the experience for those living or working within his projects. He was also focused on making them unlike anything that existed in Tampa Bay at the time.

He would go to a piece of property — I accompanied him on these excursions so *many times* — and we would walk all over the land. He would say, “This is what the land wants to be,” and proceed to tell me all his ambitious ideas for transforming the area.

Like any good lawyer, I provided steady counsel and reminded him of the facts — that what he wished to do was contrary to over a dozen statutes and codes.

And like *any great visionary*, he was undeterred. He would say, “Go change the law.”

Moments like this also shaped my mindset in complex situations. Instead of saying, “I’m sorry, you just can’t do that,” my approach to practicing the law became more about seeing opportunities to influence the law for the better — and collaborating with others to make it happen. This led to many opportunities to be involved in public policy at the local, state, and national levels.

As lawyers, you will have unlimited opportunities to impact lives and create meaningful change. Whether locally or globally — the possibilities are endless. To be effective, you must be open to opportunities and search out pathways to enhanced purpose. This will add meaning and joy to your practice.

Which brings me to the final lesson, and it is about something I call the mantle of credibility.

The senior partner I used to work for — Clint Brown, the one who asked me to work with the environmental client I mentioned earlier — would always tell me “I’m giving you my mantle of credibility” but along with that, he would say “Don’t damage it.”

What he meant was he was vouching for me, and that by doing so others would know to take me seriously. Our firm had a strong reputation, and the mantle of

credibility reflected that. Doing our jobs well established our credibility, and to maintain it, we had to keep protecting our credibility by continuing to do our jobs well.

We had the mantle of credibility because we were professional and trustworthy. It gave us a strong rapport with our clients and a leg-up with the judges, regulators, government officials, and other decision-makers we worked with. I cannot emphasize enough the power of credibility — it is a reflection of your character and ultimately will impact the degree of success you have in the practice of law.

Be mindful of your responsibilities, your clients, and the profession you represent. To practice law is a great honor, and it is an equally great responsibility. By letting your character be your compass, you can accomplish incredible feats, and change the world for the better.

As the newest class of law school graduates, you have all proven that you are tenacious, ambitious, and ready for any challenge that may come your way. Your futures are incredibly bright, and I look forward to cheering you on as part of the Stetson Alumni Family.

As a fellow alumna of this wonderful institution, I can tell you that your time at Stetson has prepared you well for this next chapter — and now it is up to you to write the rest of your story.

Thank you again for inviting me to join you for today's celebration and for presenting me with this tremendous honor.

Congratulations to the Stetson Law Class of 2024! Now, go make us proud! Go Hatters!