

College of Arts & Sciences
Suffolk University
Commencement 2024
Honorary Degree Speaker
The Honorable Kimberly S. Budd, HDPS '24

KIMBERLY BUDD: Thank you, Chair Lamb, President Kelly, Provost Sandel, Dean Sparks, and Professor Monticello for this great honor. You know, two of my colleagues on the Supreme Judicial Court, Justice Gaziano and Justice Georges, are alumni of Suffolk Law School. So I'm so pleased that I can now say that I have a Suffolk degree, too. [LAUGHTER]

Members of the board of trustees, faculty, administrators, and staff of the College of Arts & Sciences, and most importantly, members of the Class of 2024, and your families and friends, it's a great pleasure for me to join you today.

Let me begin by asking you who are graduating today just to think back to your early days of your first year at Suffolk. Just take a moment to think about how you felt. Were you excited, nervous, a little bit of both? You were no doubt excited to embark on a new stage of your life, to meet new friends, and take on new challenges. But you also had to adjust to the new responsibilities and a new environment. And if you were like me when I started college, you may have also had to face your own self-doubt. Think about all the challenges that you surmounted to get to this day, not least of which was dealing with all of the uncertainties and changes caused by the

COVID-19 pandemic. But somehow you did it. You made it to graduation. You're here. Congratulations. [APPLAUSE]

Now, for many of you, the support of family or friends or mentors was critical to your success, and I'm sure that faculty and staff were extremely important and supported you as well. So please, let's give those who are here to celebrate you today a round of applause. [APPLAUSE]

Hopefully in the process you also learned something about yourself. You discovered that you have the strength to overcome challenges that you may not have thought you could conquer. Cherish that knowledge. Do not let it leave you. And it will serve you well in the future.

I speak from experience. Let me tell you a story. I was a hard worker in high school. I always tried to do my best. And more often than not, I did pretty well. So when I got to college, I thought I knew what I was doing. I thought I had everything under control. And then I got back my first English paper. I don't remember what the topic was, but I do remember that it was marked with a big fat D. OK, maybe it wasn't big and fat, but it was a D. And I couldn't understand it. I thought I knew how to write. As it turned out, I didn't.

My professor recommended that I go to the writing center for tutoring. I was embarrassed, and I felt like a failure. I didn't realize at that time that he did me a huge favor. Spoiler alert, things turned out OK in the end. [LAUGHTER] But back to the story. I had to face facts. If I wasn't a good writer, which plainly I was not, I had to do something about it. So I went to the writing center. And I worked with a student tutor for the rest of my freshman year.

During that year, as I was contemplating majors, I came to the conclusion that if I wanted to be able to write clearly and persuasively, I needed to make sure that I majored in something that would require me to do a lot of writing. So I decided to major in English. I even asked the professor who gave me the D to be my advisor. My junior year, he recommended me to the professor who ran the writing center to be a writing tutor myself. And ultimately, that devastated student who started off with a D ended up graduating with honors and getting into law school. [APPLAUSE]

So this experience served me well in later years. As a young Black woman attorney I was often overlooked, underestimated, and even misidentified in the courtroom when I first started

practicing law. Opposing counsel did not take me seriously. I distinctly remember being treated like I was some sort of novelty by opposing counsel when I was a first-year associate at a law firm. Once, when I approached a courtroom clerk in a case that I was handling, I was even mistaken for a defendant's girlfriend and told that only lawyers were allowed past the bar into the well of the courtroom.

I'll admit, it was often discouraging, and it didn't do a whole lot for my confidence either. But I also knew from my college experience that if I persevered, I could face up to the challenge. I learned to make being underestimated work to my advantage, and gradually I found my own strengths and style in the courtroom. When I tried cases as a federal prosecutor, I was never the loudest or the flashiest. I was always very matter-of-fact. But I think the jurors came to trust me because I was just being straight with them. I wasn't talking down to them. And I knew that I had the jury when I could see them nodding as I gave my closing argument.

Those experiences later gave me the confidence to apply to become a judge on the Massachusetts Superior Court, and then to the Supreme Judicial Court, and more recently to apply for the position of chief justice. [APPLAUSE]

Now, this is important. At each stage, I would have been much more comfortable just staying where I was, and taking the next step was intimidating in a lot of ways. But I also knew that I had the strength and ability to take that next step, because I had stepped out of my comfort zone before. So in an interesting way, I might never have become chief justice if it weren't for that D on my first English paper and what it taught me about myself. And I have to tell you that given that start, it still blows my mind that I now write for a living.

I hope that you might find similar lessons for yourselves as you reflect on your experiences on your journey to this graduation day. At some point along the way, you likely stumbled and had to pick yourself up and try again. But whether you realize it or not, that experience has made you stronger and better prepared for the challenges that await you. And in the future, when you face a difficult situation, as you undoubtedly will, I hope that you will find in yourselves the strength to pick yourself up again, continue to move forward, and carry with you the lessons that you learned from the experience, as they will no doubt be helpful as you face your next setback.

There's another lesson that I learned from my undergraduate experience that I'd like to share, and that's the value of a liberal arts education, like the one that you've received.

[APPLAUSE] As I mentioned, I was an English major. Who out here are English majors? [APPLAUSE] All right, so we have a couple of potential English teachers out there. Just joking. No, it's wonderful. It would be wonderful to be an English teacher. I know that people sometimes make jokes about the impracticality of an English major. But I happen to think that majoring in English may have been one of the best things that I could have done to prepare for my legal career, because if you think about it, law, like literature, is all about language, interpretation, and communication. The same skills that you use to interpret a poem can help you interpret a statute. And writing a judicial opinion is a lot like writing a good expository essay.

But whether you majored in math or history or sociology or chemistry, you all learned essential skills that will serve you well in the future. These include the ability to assimilate and organize information, the ability to formulate and analyze arguments based on that information, and the ability to communicate those arguments persuasively. These skills are fundamental to critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving.

And as it happens, these are the kind of skills that are most in demand among employers. According to a 2023 survey by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, when identifying strong job candidates, at least three-quarters of employers are looking for evidence of very important skills such as oral and written communication, critical and creative thinking, and complex problem solving.

But the value of a liberal arts education goes far beyond employability. It also equips you to contribute to society as a thoughtful and engaged citizen. This wider vision of the value of a liberal arts education is reflected in the mission statement of the College of Arts & Sciences from which you are graduating. It states, "Liberal learning prepares students of all ages and backgrounds to live more fulfilling lives, to appreciate and contribute to the communities of which they are members, and to reach their ethical, personal, intellectual, and financial goals."

One of the ways in which liberal arts education can be most valuable to us today is by enabling us to communicate across political and ideological divides that are polarizing our society. As students, you have learned to communicate

effectively. You know that you need to understand your audience and to think about their perspective on the topic that you're discussing. You also have learned that to problem solve, you have to be able to work collaboratively with others. You have to be able to listen with an open mind, because the most effective solution may be the one that synthesizes several different approaches.

I have seen the value of these lessons demonstrated over and over in my legal career. As a trial attorney and as a judge, I've learned how important it is to be able to look at an issue from a perspective different from your own. In my current position as one of seven justices on the Supreme Judicial Court, I've seen the importance and effectiveness of being able to look at an issue from different perspectives and communicate in spite of differences of opinion. When we first hear a case, we may not always agree on its proper resolution. But even when we disagree, we always respect each other's views. We really try to listen carefully to each other and to look for areas of agreement. Most of the time we're able to resolve our differences and reach a consensus. Sometimes we can't. But either way, I believe that our opinions are stronger and better balanced as a result of this process.

But can we really succeed in creating dialogs that bridge the enormous differences that divide our country? Let me share one more example from my experience that gives me hope. Over the last year, I've been working with a committee of judges, district attorneys, and defense lawyers to develop a restorative justice pilot program in some of our courts. For those of you who are not familiar with it, restorative justice has been defined as a process to involve to the extent possible those who have a stake in a specific offense, and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations in order to heal and put things right, as right as possible. Typically the people who have a stake in the offense are the person who committed it, the victim of the offense or related survivors, and members of the community where the offense occurred. It's a voluntary process that brings these people together to discuss the impact of the offense and what the offender can do to make amends to the victim and the broader community.

Ordinarily this process takes place with people sitting in a circle, a practice rooted in Indigenous community traditions. In the circle, the offender, community members, and the victim or survivor, or sometimes a surrogate, come together to speak openly and honestly about the harm caused by the offense and how the offender can repair it. This process gives the opportunity

to victims and survivors to share the trauma and grief that they've experienced, and to shape the outcome of the case. For that reason, victims and survivors often say that they find restorative justice more satisfying than traditional prosecutions, where so often they do not have much of a say. The circle also gives offenders the chance to understand the impact of what they've done and what they need to do to make reparations for it. Not surprisingly, because the process requires offenders to hold themselves accountable for the harm that they've caused, available data indicates that restorative justice has been remarkably effective in preventing recidivism.

Over the past several months, I, with other state court judges, have had a chance to participate in restorative justice circles run by the men in one of our state prisons. And I have to tell you that the experience has been extraordinary. The facilitators who are trained to run the circles are all serving time, and many are in for life. The facilitators provide a topic for discussion. For example, name a time when you felt safe or a time when you felt unsafe. And each person in the circle, whether they are a judge, a prosecutor or defense lawyer, a victim, survivor, inmate, or community member, each has an opportunity to share an experience of their own. The process sounds unremarkable, but sitting in a circle as equals and

sharing life experiences, we have the opportunity to see one another as individuals and as a part of a broader community. And we built bonds of empathy despite our differences.

Towards the end of the day, a few men who volunteered ahead of time gave a public apology to a full auditorium. We in the audience stood in for the victims or survivors as the offender described the crimes that he had committed, the impact of the harm that he caused, and what he was trying to do to make amends. Giving a public apology is something that the volunteer had to spend a lot of time preparing for and working up the nerve to do. Having to face the hurt that one has caused is a difficult thing. I've attended these restorative justice circles in prison three times. Each time, the experience was exhausting but very powerful, and frankly very humbling. It gave me a chance to see restorative justice in action, and gave me a sense of the potential difference that it could make in our justice system.

Now, I want to be clear, the process is not easy. It takes a great deal of preparation, time, and commitment. But if we can bring together judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, victims, offenders, and others to talk with one another openly and

honestly as a part of the same community, then perhaps we can learn to do the same thing for our divided country.

I know that as you graduate, the many challenges that we face, both at home and across the world, are grave. But I have hope for the future because of you. I remember how growing up in the '60s and '70s—well, let's say '70s and '80s—I saw a new generation help usher in a new era of civil rights, women's rights, and human rights, equal justice and environmental awareness. And I have hope that your generation may be the same, because your generation, perhaps more than any one before you, has learned to appreciate the differences among us, to treat everyone with dignity and respect, and to recognize the common humanity that unites us all.

So members of the Class of 2024, go forward with the strength you've gained from overcoming your failures. Keep your courage up even when you have reason to be discouraged. And use the skills that you have learned from your Suffolk experience, to engage in dialog with others who may disagree with you. This is how you will build a better society.

Once again, congratulations to you all and my very best wishes for you in the future. [APPLAUSE]

