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Graduation Keynote Address

Clarence Thomas
U.S. Supreme Court

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University of Georgia School of Law
Graduation Keynote Address
by U.S Supreme Court Associate Justice Clarence Thomas
May 17, 2003

Thank you. President Adams, Dean Shipley, members of the faculty, family, friends, and most importantly, graduates. It's good to be in Georgia. And you do get the feeling on this court, a real court, that you'd like to say 'How 'bout them dogs!'

Megan, thank you for your very, very kind introduction. It's been a lot of years since I have stopped in this area and I can still remember my first train trip on the 'Nancy Hanks' in 1967 to Atlanta to take what would be my first airplane trip to Missouri to start college. I always thought it was a little bit ironic that in the heart of Dixie the 'Nancy Hanks' was named after Abraham Lincoln's mother. It seemed to be somewhat of a joke.

But today, graduates, this is your day. This is the day that you have been waiting for and it is with great delight that I join you. And, I am humbled by the warm, sincere and accommodating efforts that you've made to have me here today. One reason is because I enjoy commencements which are really beginnings. It's not the end of law school. It's a beginning of another part of your lives. It both celebrates the end of your preparation here and the beginning of a life beyond these walls. Twenty-nine years ago, I sat where you sit today. But, I must say that even as my memory serves me well and continues to do so, I can't remember who the commencement speaker was. So, I have no illusions that what I say will achieve the permanence of the Gettysburg Address. But, I can promise you that I will try to approximate its brevity.

When I was graduating, I outwardly thought that I knew so much - that I had all the answers or as my grandfather said I was 'Mr. Know-It-All.' I was so sure outwardly, but inwardly, I was relieved just to complete 20 years of formal education without faltering or, more accurately, without quitting, for I often faltered. To my core at my graduation, I was a swirling combination of frustration - frustration for not being able to find a job in Georgia, disappointment - disappointment about having been rejected by every firm to which I applied in Atlanta, and anxiety -- anxiety about the future, what would it bring? A glimmer of hope, though, still existed.

A hope about what? A hope about the good, about what would happen with my life, about how I would do in Jefferson City, Missouri, a place I had never lived and a place where I knew no one. I had watched my dream of going back to Savannah evaporate before my eyes. I had seen my desperate attempts to get a job in a top-flight law firm, any place, yield a bitter and fruitless harvest. Indeed, I had only the barren husks of rejection letters - or rejection letter after rejection letter - to show for my efforts and I must say that I have kept that crop of rejection letters over the years to refer to them as I've gone on with my life. It didn't seem to matter to those firms or to anyone that I had tried so hard and that I had done what I was supposed to do. But, my small consolation was a young attorney general in Missouri who greeted me with the observation that, 'Clarence, there is plenty of room at the top.' That was easy for him to say, and I told him. He was heir to the Ralston Purina fortune. What did I have? He was also white, and I was not white.

So, at my commencement on a beautiful day in May, 29 years ago, I sat exactly where you are with fewer relatives to witness my commencement and with only one job offer in Jefferson City, Missouri. Some of my classmates warned that I had wasted a Yale law degree. Others laughed and some seemed to look at me with pity. But, I still remember that at my beginning, when I was 25 years old, I got to sit where you're sitting with some small amount of hope and with some residue of the dreams that I had come to law school with.

I've often told my friends that no biographer could peer into our souls, our lives, and really know what it was like in those moments or in subsequent moments that replicated those moments. They can string together some events and some facts and they can look at your life retrospectively. But, you have to live it forward. They can omit, they can add and they can alter to suit their purposes, but no one can really ever know the swirl of emotions you're going through now or that I went through then. No one could ever know those hard moments, those difficult times, the loneliness, and the trials and tribulations. In hindsight, they can create perceptions of all of us as saints or sinners, villains or heroes, but they can never know what it was really like for me or for you. In large measure, I can only say that I'm here today because I had a chance to sit where you sit today 29 years ago.

As I look out on each of you and as I visited with you over the past evening and yesterday, I wish as I so often wish with my son and now with my great-nephew that I could guarantee each of you success, but I can't. I wish I could help find that perfect job or any job for that matter, but I can't. I wish I could assure you all happiness and productive lives, but I can't. I wish I could solve all the world's problems, but I can't. But, I do know that you all are here at your commencement that you're beginning and, with that, each of you has a chance.

Try to always remember to be positive and try to remember those who helped you get this far so that you could have a chance - those who helped you to help yourself or when you needed it most. Remember your parents, remember your relatives, remember your friends and your teachers. Thank them, appreciate them and hold on to them. Remember that you didn't get this far on your own and you certainly didn't come this far without your faith and you won't go very far without either.

Try to be a hero, not a victim. Today, our wonderful country and our society are suffocating in a cultural atmosphere of victimization. While a victim wallows in self-pity and defeatism, a hero takes on challenges. From time to time, I'm asked who my heroes are. Quite frankly, the longer I live, the more I respect and admire those who live their lives diligently, discharging their daily responsibilities without complaint. As a result, I find myself admiring more and more people - the people who lived around me during my childhood: Ms. Gladys, Ms. Bec, Ms. Mariah, all maids; my grandmother; Cousin Hattie and Cousin Julie. Principal among them, though, are my grandparents.

Twenty-nine years ago, when I sat where you all are sitting, I looked beyond them to those who had utopian ideals, to those who had all of the answers and the social gospel. But those two unled people embodied all that was good about this great country. They were honest, hardworking, frugal, law-abiding and deeply religious. They knew what their responsibilities and obligations were and they discharged them without complaint and this they seemed to relish. And, they did this at a time when things seemed all bad for members of our race. There always seemed to be something for which to be grateful in their household - a roof over our head, food on the table and clothes on our backs. They accepted life on its own terms with all its attendant difficulties and challenges, and there were many. But, they refused to complain and being a victim of circumstances was not among their options nor was it among the options that they allowed for the two boys they raised.

Somehow, this seems to be what heroes are all about. But, today, as the fabric of our society is saturated with complaint and protests, each of you has this grand opportunity to be a hero. But, know in advance, that it is hard, very hard, and you can't be a hero and a victim simultaneously. Do what you know must be done. Do those things that are before you now. Do them well.

Some years ago, I visited with a group of young students - I believe they were 10 or 11 years old. One of the students looked me in the eyes and asked, 'Have you ever felt like giving up?' I can still hear her youthful, innocent voice, 'Have you ever felt like giving up?' I was stunned. I could not remember having been asked that question before, but here it was from the mouth of a child. 'Yes,' I said to her. 'I have felt like giving up, a hundred times a day.' And, so will each of you. There will be those days when you will not want to face the day or the hour or the minute. There will be those days when you believe you can't take it anymore. There will be those days when it all seems so hopeless and pointless. Yes, there will be those days. But, those days are just a part of life. You can either quit or you can continue as best you can. And, in our hearts, we all know that quitting is not a real option. It is just what it is - quitting. Never quit. No matter how bad things get, never even think about it.

Each of you is about to enter the legal profession. And, by now, I'm sure you know the critical role that the law and the rule of law play in a free society. As lawyers, you will not only begin careers. You can also assume considerable responsibility to make our country, our legal system and our society work. But, before you can do any of this, you must first just try to be heroes - heroes to your families, to your friends, to your neighbors and to yourselves. Be true to your faith and to your beliefs. Be honest. Hold on to your hope and the positive aspects of life. Treat others as you would like to be treated, that should be your golden rule.

Twenty-nine years ago, when I sat where you sit, I didn't think that way. But, I implore you that 29 years from today just be

able to honestly say to yourselves, to your families and to your kids - I did the best to be my best, to be honest, to help others and to treat others as I would like to be treated. I assure you that if you can do that, somewhere you will be a hero to someone. And, those of us who are slowly slipping into the twilight of our mortality are counting on you all to do that because we need heroes too.

God bless you and congratulations!