Judge Lisa Godbey Wood (J.D. ’90) of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Georgia delivered the keynote address for commencement, which she described as a rare “new life day.”

She explained to graduates that one of the blessings of a “new life day” is the cleansing power it has.

“Today more than any other day marks the beginning of [your] life as a lawyer,” Wood said. “This new life that you have earned … is unblemished. As a lawyer you have never taken a cheap shot. You have never done less than a courageous thing. You have never told a lie. You see, when you walk across this stage your moral compass is recalibrated. It is reconciled and it points true north.”

She encouraged graduates to take advantage of this fresh start and gave them four tips on how to not only be successful but also how to be satisfied in the practice of law.

The first step, Wood said, is to realize that good lawyers win big cases and lose big cases. “Whenever you hear somebody touting a zero trial loss record, you’ve probably met someone who isn’t trying enough cases,” she said.

Secondly, satisfied lawyers are focused on serving the people they represent. They spend time with them, they get to know them and they anticipate their fears. “The happiest lawyers are the ones who serve their clients the best.”

To drive home the point, Wood shared an example of a lawyer who allows his clients to actually stay in his home with his family during that client’s trial. “You might say ‘well very few people can go that far,’ and that’s right. But then again, very few people will ever be the answer to the question, ‘Who is the best trial lawyer you have ever seen?’”

Additionally, Wood shared that satisfied lawyers “are not afraid to call a penalty shot on themselves.” She reminded the graduates that not every fact and not every precedent case will go their client’s way. However, she added that satisfied lawyers are the ones who do not lie about it or pretend otherwise.

“Over time in civil law, lawyers and clients come to look alike,” Wood said. “Honest, hardworking, good lawyers end up with honest, hardworking, good clients. And the reverse is true. If ever you lose a client because you have refused to stoop ethically, you have lost nothing.”

The final tip Wood gave was one she said she almost missed during her career.

“The best, most fulfilled lawyers take that spark of inspiration – that small flame of desire that made you go to law school, that kept you in it, that got you through it and that is inside you right now – [and] they keep that flame and they tend it,” Wood explained.

She also shared with graduates some thoughts on the legal profession in general.

“The economics of law practice have waxed and waned through the years, and it will continue to do so,” Wood said. “In good economic times, a law degree from a prized school such as this one is quickly valuable. In bad economic times, it will slowly be priceless.”

Wood also encouraged students, reminding them that while starting salaries for jobs may not be on the rise, “satisfaction in the legal profession and intrinsic happiness” in the work that one does as a lawyer is – especially among the “newer minted” lawyers.

“You didn’t come this far, you didn’t get here by giving up easily or by being easily discouraged,” she said. “So don’t let anyone chip away parts of your true career goals, [and] don’t let anyone chip away from the majesty of this profession.”