

## 2013 LAW COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

**Hamline Law alum Victor Vieth, JD '87, served as the commencement ceremony speaker at the law commencement ceremony on May 17, 2013. Vieth is the executive director of the National Child Protection Training Center (NCPTC), a state of the art training complex located on the campus of Winona State University. His address to the graduates is printed below.**

While preparing my remarks for commencement, a good friend told me not to worry. “After all,” he reasoned, “nobody is coming to hear you speak, nobody wants you to speak very long, and nobody is going to remember what you say.”

There is a great deal of wisdom in my friend’s words. Twenty five years ago, I sat where each of you are sitting and although I remember a great deal about the day I graduated from this law school, I can’t tell you who the commencement speaker was, much less anything he or she said.

The reason commencement addresses often fail is the speaker forgets who it is all about. It is about you, the class of 2013, and all the thoughts and emotions pulsing through your veins. To this end, and with the sincere hope this may help one or more of you, I’d like to share the ten things I wish I had heard from my commencement speaker so long ago.

First, and foremost, don’t be afraid. Unlike other commencements, law school graduates often temper their celebration with the knowledge the bar examination is close at hand and, if we do not succeed there, we fear this graduation day, and all the work of the past three years will be for naught.

To some extent, this fear is a good thing—it will no doubt spur you to study harder than at any point in your life. As a result, most of you will pass the bar. Those of you who fall short will make it on the second try. In a worst case scenario, you will learn that you have been prepared not to be a member of the bar, but to work in some other profession, a profession for which you have great passion and for which your law degree will nonetheless help you in ways you cannot yet imagine.

All the graduates who have gone before, all the ghosts of commencements past, are speaking to you today. And we are urging you not to be afraid and to celebrate your graduation with the joy you have earned.

Second, look for and then seize your defining moment. A quarter of a century ago, most of my graduating class, including me, did not yet have a job and were uncertain what our calling in the law really was. Even those of us who thought we were certain would learn in the years to come that we were wrong, that there was an area of the law we had never heard of and for which we were ideally suited.

In my years at Hamline, and on my day of graduation, the thought of becoming a prosecutor, much less a child abuse prosecutor, never crossed my mind. I took a job as a prosecutor not because I wanted to be one, but because I wasn’t confident my parents would let me live with them forever.

Two weeks into my career, I was asked to litigate a termination of parental rights case. The most poignant moment of that trial occurred when a young social worker was grilled by the defense attorney about all the things he did wrong in the case. One of the things he did wrong was to remove a baby from the home which, under Minnesota

law, only a police officer can do. When cross examined this way, the social worker began to cry and said simply, “the baby was covered with maggots.”

Before that trial, I didn’t know we lived in a country where babies can be covered with maggots. After that trial, I knew the rest of my days would be spent as a child protection attorney.

It may not be as dramatic or come as quickly, but each of you will have a defining moment in the years to come, a moment that tells you this is what you were born to do. When that day arrives, and if you seize that moment, the present anxiety about your future will melt into the peace that comes with knowing you have found your place and are ready to leave your mark.

Third, remember the “headline rule.” All of you have studied ethics, all of you will be tested on this subject, and then all the rules you have memorized will be quickly forgotten. That’s OK. The vast majority of ethical conundrums you will encounter are not answerable in any of the rules. In order to survive, in order to live with yourself, you need only remember the “headline rule.” Whenever you are uncertain, simply ask yourself, “If my action were on the front page of tomorrow’s paper, how would I feel?” If public disclosure would not bother you, the action is almost certainly appropriate. If not, you should probably make a different choice.

Fourth, you can change the world from anywhere. There is a myth that you need to be in a state or national capitol or at least a large metropolis or large law firm to have a real impact. This belief is refuted by even a cursory reading of history. The reformation was conceived in the tiny town of Wittenberg. Brothers bearing the name “Mayo” did things no other doctors of their era dared—and the rich and famous and powerful came to the small town of Rochester to behold the possibilities. I was a prosecutor in a rural county of 13,000 people but we implemented child protection reforms that put us on the national stage and have been replicated throughout the United States. I’m part of Gundersen Health System and, in the decades to come, the pioneering work we are doing on adverse childhood experiences will make the cure of polio seem inconsequential.

Simply stated, it is not where you are, but who you are that matters.

Fifth, if you want to think big, you need to think small. Not only can you change the world from anywhere, it may be easier to change the world from a small community or small law firm. The bureaucracy is more manageable, change comes more easily, and the lack of resources in smaller circles requires creativity. If I had gone to a big city, or a big law firm, or a big prosecutor’s office, I wouldn’t be speaking at commencement today.

Sixth, the education you have received at Hamline has fully prepared you for the battles ahead. As a young lawyer, I prosecuted a well to do criminal who hired the best Harvard educated lawyer his money could buy. My Ivy League opponent showed up at the preliminary hearing with an assortment of family members and other unseemly characters that had previously refused to talk to the police. In putting them on the witness stand, the defense attorney gave me the sort of free discovery that is often unheard of in a criminal case. By the time I was done cross examining his witnesses, I had turned a good case for the prosecution into a great case. My friend from Harvard lamented “I just gift wrapped a conviction for you, didn’t I?” I told him he should have taken Joe Daly’s trial advocacy course at Hamline University School of Law.

Seventh, find your faith. Through no fault of Hamline, I lost my faith at law school. Rigorous academic thought seemed incompatible with religious belief. This left me alone to face a sea of children who have known only the fearsome side of life. Ironically, it was these very children, many of whom were abused in the name of God, who

brought me back to my knees. When beaten boys and raped girls find feeble prayers sufficient to face another day, it becomes harder to question the possibility God exists and that he dwells among the suffering. I wish I had known that sooner.

Eighth, success comes at a price. If you invest yourself fully, you can make a lot of money, advance quickly, or fulfill your wildest idealistic fantasies. I did all of this and more—but it came with a cost. If you choose a similar path, there will come a day when the pain of missed recitals, birthday parties, and anniversaries tugs at you and no accolade can replace what you have lost. This is not to say I would have done things differently, this is not to say you shouldn't pursue your goals with all that you can muster, but it is to say you should make your decisions with your eyes wide open.

Ninth, take care of yourself. No matter how busy your life becomes, take some time for music, and dog walking, and sunsets. If you're lucky to find someone who loves you in spite of your faults, cling tight to him or her and, should you ever be given the honor of speaking at the commencement ceremonies at your alma mater, turn to your spouse, as I'm turning now to my wife, Lisa, and thank her for sharing your elusive dreams.

Tenth, know that, with your graduation today, your family has grown immeasurably. When you survive law school together, there is a bond among your classmates that is unlike any other schooling. I am confident that many joys are just around the corner and that you will want to share them with one another. At the same time, I know that life brings gray days. The class of 1987, the class from which I graduated, has known its heartaches—divorces, diseases, even death.

Should sorrows come your way, think back to the classmates who got you through the scariest moments of law school, and who otherwise helped keep your life intact for the past 1,000 days. Wherever you go, whatever you experience, these friends are just a Facebook page away. If your classmates are like mine, they will befriend you not only through social media but in real life and even in the darkest moments.

The time has come now for me to sit down and for each of you to stand up, to stand up and receive your diploma and to take the first step in a great adventure. As you take this step, and every subsequent step, always know that the faculty and administration of Hamline, and all of us who have loved this law school, will be watching from a distance. We'll be watching, and we'll be cheering you on.

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