

Class of 2022 Learned How to “Lean In to Resilience,” Keenan Says

NAACP’s Former General Counsel Addressed Graduates



Kim Keenan '87 delivered the Law School's commencement address at John Paul Jones Arena on Sunday. Photo by Tom Cogill.

By Melissa Castro Wyatt

There was much pomp despite the many circumstances, as the University of Virginia School of Law bestowed degrees on its graduating Class of 2022 on Sunday.

While hundreds of carefully aligned chairs and risers stood abandoned in the steam of the heat on the Law Grounds, the ceremony took place at John Paul Jones Arena and marked the first traditional in-person graduation ceremony for the school since 2019 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Commencement speaker **Kim Keenan '87** paid tribute to the toughness of a class that has seen contentious political storms, war abroad and grief around the globe in their three years of law school.

“Today, you have demonstrated that you know how to lean in to your resilience,” she said. “Getting your law degree during a global pandemic — with all of that extra life-and-death pressure on your ability to learn, to focus and engage with the faculty and your classmates — is more than remarkable.”

Keenan urged graduates to “take all of this well-earned resilience and use it to leave your fingerprints all over your community, your city, our nation, and yes, the world. Take a minute to just salute yourself for getting here intact and in person.”

During her 35-year career, Keenan was the youngest person — and only second woman — to serve as general counsel of the NAACP. Her range of experiences include a federal clerkship, private practice at the nation’s largest law firm, founding her own law firm, teaching law, presiding over two bar associations and now working as a mediator, arbitrator and neutral evaluator in Washington, D.C.

Keenan used her own experience to illustrate the possibilities that can happen when you balance your professional life to include family and service to the community, when you “take ownership of your career” and when you “find your place and own it.”

“I have decided to get up in the morning because I choose how I get to use this amazing toolkit,” Keenan said. “Part and parcel of my decades-long love of the law is the ability to make a difference, whether it’s election protections so every community can vote freely, developing policy to raise

the digital divide, resolving the sports dispute or creating the landlord-tenant self-help center. Yes, you can still be an [intellectual property] lawyer and fight for climate change.”

Keenan expressed hope that today’s graduates will “dwarf the accomplishments” of those who came before, and she left them with words reminding them of the value of challenges — those conquered and those to come.

“There is no testimony without a test. There can be no triumph without a trial. And there have never been diamonds without fire,” Keenan said. “You have passed the tests and prevailed at trial, so you can be fearless knowing you were built for this.”

Dean Risa Goluboff praised graduates, who experienced one last “unwelcome contingency plan” in the ceremony’s move to the arena due to heat and the threat of thunderstorms.

“Throughout it all, you have maintained your characteristic collegiality and generosity,” Goluboff said. “You came to this law school from so many different backgrounds, with a wide variety of views, experiences, hopes and dreams. And I have marveled at the joy, humanity, respect, dialogue and collaboration.”

Goluboff saluted the class for its many achievements and benchmarks, including contributing more than 15,575 hours of pro bono service. A total of 99 students met the school’s 75-hour pro bono challenge. Those students supported prisoners, children, disabled veterans, Afghan refugees seeking humanitarian parole, and local residents struggling with addiction during the COVID pandemic. In total, 327 J.D. and 43 LL.M. candidates were to receive degrees.

“I hope that over the past three years, you have learned this power of the law, that it is not a constant external foreign thing that exists in some vacuum out there,” Goluboff said. “It is made not found, and it is made by lawyers, which means it is now made by you.”

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Learn more about Kim Keenan at jamsadr.com/keenan.

