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## Commencement Address, CUNY School of Law

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# Cuny School of Law Commencement Address

By Margaret E. Montoya

May 15, 2009

Class of 2009, distinguished guests, faculty, families, friends, Good afternoon *y buenas tardes*. Class of 2009, we are here to celebrate you. I offer you my sincerest congratulations *y felicidades*. The climb has been steep; you have reached this mountaintop. You should feel very proud. Education is universally valued; in every culture, through every epoch, and in every society, education is a source of respect; the Juris Doctor degree is one of the scarcest and most prized markers of academic achievement.

It is a great honor for me to speak on the occasion of your graduation. I stand here as the holder of the Haywood Burns Chair, humbled and inspired by the passion and habits of heart that drove Haywood Burns to implement a new model of legal education based on the commitment to public interest. Twenty years ago he was completing his first year as dean. On the occasion of his inauguration in September of 1988, he spoke these words, "Now more than ever, there is a need to produce lawyers who will go into the public interest...now more than ever we need voices for the voiceless."

Lawyers have a special role in democracies and especially in this society that is more divided than ever by race, income, wealth; divided, in Haywood Burns' words, "by the thickness of your billfold or the amount of melanin in your skin." Lawyers are the sector from which this society draws its leadership. Now more than ever, you CUNY law grads have a special role to play in social reform and civic re-engagement because of your training using law for social justice.

Law and its institutions are changed through small steps and occasional large insurgencies. I am delighted that today a student has the opportunity to speak on behalf of the class. When I asked the faculty to describe this class, I was told you were activists and showed a special solidarity. Students told me that having a student speak during graduation was a change in the institution's rituals that you particularly wanted. So the students organized themselves and arranged to meet with Dean Anderson. Some were nervous as the meeting approached. Who is at the table and who gets to speak is vitally important; including many different voices chips away at the walls of silence and the walls of words that keep us from understanding one another, paradoxically the need to advocate for one's right to speak can have a silencing effect. In this case, the students' request was embraced. I applaud the students who organized to add a student speaker to this program and Dean Anderson for listening and acting.

Let me once more invoke the spirit of Haywood Burns by repeating his words, "Though I know we [at CUNY Law School] are on the right track, we can expect more adversity, for those who comfort the afflicted will ever afflict the comfortable. We must continue undaunted, still believing that truth crushed to earth shall rise

again; still working to build a law school and a society founded on what Learned Hand called the one commandment of the law—"thou shall not ration justice." Thou shall not ration justice.

Our future depends on educated students such as you. As scarce and valuable resources, you are your community's treasure. You are entering the profession at an historic time when those who have little power, money or prestige will make a claim on you and your talents.

It has become a cliché to say that we owe our accomplishments to the efforts of many other people and that we stand on the shoulders of others. But there are meaningful ways of recognizing those who have helped us. Twenty years ago, Haywood Burns began his deanship by naming some of those who cleared the path for him: William Henry Burns, his grandfather, Junious, his father and Josephine, his mother "who as a little orphan girl with one dress and no shoes, dreamed, in the red Virginia dust, of a better day." Allow me to share two stories with you, told by two members of your class. I have no doubt that others of you could also tell such stories. I share these two stories with you to induce you to think about those who opened doors for you.

Catalina Rosales remembers receiving a phone call telling her that she was being admitted to CUNY Law School. She ended the call and told her mother Rosa Agudelo the news. Her mother's tears cascaded down her cheeks as she told Catalina and herself, "It has all been worth it." Her mother had trained as a nurse in Colombia before emigrating to the U.S., but unable to work in that capacity, she cleaned houses and offices, often working until 3 or 4 in the morning. Catalina remembers her mother handing her a tax refund check for \$2000 and her mother worrying that it was not enough to pay for college expenses. Cleaning after others, riding buses and subways, losing sleep — it has all been worth it, she said. Catalina can still hear her mother's voice admonishing and encouraging — "Do something for "us" — do something for the immigrants, for the working families. Catalina remembers food — sancocho, arroz con pollo. Her mother would cook large batches on Sundays, freeze it so Catalina wouldn't have to spend time or money cooking.

Samantha Thomas also remembers on whose shoulders she stands. Sam had already earned a BA and a Master's degree when she informed her parents that she was planning to go to law school. Her folks Leopold and Nella Thomas come from the Caribbean islands; Leopold is from Trinidad and Nella from Grenada. Immigrating to another land and a different culture is never easy. In the U.S., they have worked to create opportunities for Sam and her siblings, so it was worrisome for them when Sam announced that she would continue with three more years of school.

Ask Sam about the first year and she becomes quiet and looks away. She says, "Groceries. I remember my father sitting near the security desk with a bag of groceries. I had been studying until late at night. The truth is that I had been eating irregularly. I couldn't take the time; I didn't have the money. So he went and bought food — cereal, peanut butter, bread. Then he came to the law school, but the security officer stopped him at the door. So he sat and waited until I appeared. I was amazed;

I was delighted. I still remember that bag of groceries and the many times that he brought me food. Over time he even became friends with the security guards.”

Your siblings, cousins, neighbors, classmates will gain inspiration from your success as law graduates, especially those of you who come from families who have not been benefited by ancestral power, ancestral wealth or ancestral connections. Legal education represents an investment of money, time and hopes in any one student from a complex network — of teachers, employers, community leaders; but mostly it’s an investment by parents and the extended family. A law degree is a social escalator, which helps other members of the graduate’s family gain ground—socially, politically, psychologically.

Who we are, how we see ourselves, how we want to be seen, what we value, how our memories connect us to specific histories in specific places — we communicate this information best through narratives. In Spanish we sometimes call such stories *cuentos* — an accounting. I encourage all of you to take time over the next few days to celebrate your graduation, this singular accomplishment of your lives, by accounting — by telling stories to those who have helped you, held you up, fed you, wiped your tears, paid your bills. Share your recollections. Ask your parents, your partners, your sisters and brothers to tell you what they remember about these past three years. Have you changed? How have you changed? I think one of the things that law schools do least well is helping students retain their cultural and family ties. For that reason, I encourage you to make this transition by remembering who you were when you started law school by telling your stories, finding stories about your family and community and then writing them down, recording them, videotaping them. They will be a worthy gift to your children’s children some day.

In closing allow me to offer a blessing.

May you be blessed with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep in your heart.

May you be blessed with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people and the earth so that you will work for justice, equity, and peace among all peoples.

May you be blessed with tears to shed for those who suffer so you will reach out your hands to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

And may you be blessed with the foolishness to think that you really CAN make a difference in the world, so you are able to do the things, which others say cannot be done.

Congratulations, Class of 2009. *Si se puede.*