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2019 Commencement Address by D.A. Diana Becton

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Golden Gate University School of Law
Class of 2019 Commencement Address
Delivered by Diana Becton

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Alumna (JD, '85)*
Davies Symphony Hall
May 16, 2019

Hello Golden Gate!

To President Fike, Dean Niedwieki, distinguished faculty, staff, and award recipients, thank you for the honor of spending this day with you. And, to the GGU School of Law 2019 graduates, congratulations to all of you! I know that you have worked incredibly hard to get to this day, I am so proud of you, and I hope that you are taking a moment to let the full weight of your accomplishment sink in. Appreciate this moment. Appreciate the hard work, support of family and friends. Appreciate the sacrifices made and struggles endured.

To the parents, the aunts, the grandparents, brothers, sisters, uncles, the cousins, and friends who offered support, who stood by this class, gave them words of encouragement, and helped them get here today---this is your day as well. How about a big round of applause for all of you as well!

It has been an amazing journey!

I grew up during the 50's and 60's (I know that was a long time ago). It was a time of many movements, the Civil Rights movement, the black power movement, the anti Vietnam War movement, the women's movement, the gay rights movement. I watched little Ruby Bridges take the first steps to integrate schools in the South. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. We were sitting in, attempting to integrate lunch counters, and questioning how black folks were being treated. Asking why some lives seemed to be valued more than others? People took action. We marched, picketed, sat-in, and rallied, and we also cried, experience trauma, and sought solace in sometimes self-destructive ways. At night we sat and watched TV with fear and trepidation, as brown-skinned people were hosed and attacked by dogs for simply trying to be treated with equality, dignity and respect. I learned early on that legislators, many of whom were lawyers, crafted new laws, and lawyers fought court cases that made radical changes in our society, changes that provided equal opportunity and equal rights for everyone regardless of race, ethnicity or gender. I knew in my heart that I wanted to be a lawyer, because I saw first hand that lawyers could make a difference.

I started this journey as a little girl from East Oakland, who had never met a lawyer. I had only seen lawyers on the Perry Mason show on TV. But I was a little girl with a big dream to be a lawyer. And now, I stand before you as the first person of color, the first African-American, and the first woman to serve as District Attorney in the

168-year history of the Contra Costa District Attorney's office. All things are possible.

The route that I took was not a smooth "normal path." When I was 16 years old, a new pastor, Rev. Dr. J. Alfred Smith, Sr., came to my neighborhood church. He took a look around our neighborhood. In an incredible memoir, entitled, **On The Jericho Road**, he shares this, "In 1969 East Oakland was an asphalt jungle sealed by razor-wire fences. Long legged prostitutes in tight miniskirts strolled the corners winking seductively at toothless old men. Black men of every hue stood in the shadows of the liquor stores nursing cans of cold beer. The pungent odor of marijuana floated on the morning breeze." This was more than poverty he said. "This is the violent death of the human spirit." But, Pastor Smith did not give up. And he did not allow us to give up in despair. He told us that we must "get out of our lazy rocking chairs of religion, and get out into our community and make a difference." I went to law school so that I could make a difference.

Years later, some six years after college, I was supervising a city Housing and Community Development Department, when my childhood dream to become a lawyer, to make a difference started burning in my bones. I finally applied to only one law school – Golden Gate. I attended Golden Gate at night, while I continued to work full-time during the day, and in that four-year journey to a law degree, both of my sons were born.

So why am I sharing all of this with you? A poet says, "nobody, promises us a crystal stair," and "great things never come from comfort zones."

Life has given me many twists and turns, sometimes twisting me out of shape and turning me upside down. Sometimes it did not always seem fair. However, the very defining moments of our lives are not ones that we are expecting. They are not the moments that we prepare for. I did not prepare to become the District Attorney at a time when the old way of an intense, competitive adversarial system that focused on high sentences, high conviction rates, and punishment would come to a loggerhead with the reality that right now America has but 5% of the world's population, but we have 25% of the world's prisoners. I did not prepare to be a prosecutor who has become passionate about criminal justice reform and more humane treatment of children and the mentally diseased.

Now, I've spoken about some of the challenges of the 50's and 60's.

But what is expected of us today? Truly we have come a long way, but there is still so much more work to do, so many more roads to travel, and our country needs you to take the mantle and run with it. It is up to us. It is up to you. We can't afford to sit on the sidelines, or to sit in our lazy rocking chairs, and we surely can't wait for others to tackle the problems of today. Oh no! Not when there are so many issues confronting us: Women's Rights, Voting Rights, Immigration, Criminal Justice reform, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Human Trafficking (modern day slavery). Our

economy seems to be booming, but there are still folks who can't find work that keep the lights on, or to afford decent housing, consequently record numbers of people are homeless, sleeping on the streets. We have a problem when so many boys and girls of color are pushed through a pipeline that leads from school to overcrowded prisons, and everywhere we still find people who have been marginalized, left voiceless and unseen. So make no mistake, Class of 2019 there is plenty of work to do.

During World War I, when the world seemed to be disintegrating right before us, when our very humanity was being questioned, a New York clergy declared, "It's a great time to be alive!" He was seeing the challenges of that day as an opportunity for the best of us to step up for the rest of us. You represent the best of us. It is you, you who have an opportunity to bring healing and hope to our beleaguered world!

Bishop Leontine Kelly, after many struggles, particularly with patriarchy and sexism, became the first black woman bishop when United Methodist elevated her to the position in 1984. She tells a wonderful story about when as an eight-year old girl, there was a knock at the door, and when she opened the door there was a woman she did not know. In those few seconds this stranger asked, "Little girl, who will you be? Cause you gotta' be somebody."

Whether you become a District Attorney, go into private practice, become an advocate for public interest, or a public defender, you have a unique opportunity to take on big problems, to stand up for the voiceless, to seek truth, and to seek justice and equality for all.

As I take my seat, I am reminded of the day in May 1985 when Chief Justice Rose Bird took time out of her busy schedule to serve as the key note speaker at the commencement ceremony for the 230 law school graduates of Golden Gate University. I was among the graduates that day who sat in the seats eagerly awaiting the message that we were to receive from the Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court.

On that day Justice Rose Bird did not talk about herself, or her accomplishments. On that day she counseled us to "do what is right, even though it may be unpopular." She counseled us to fight for what we believe in and hold on to our sense of humanity. That is the same challenge that I leave you with today. While this is a great day, a great day for you, your families and communities; this is also a great day to be alive and make a difference in the world. So, who you gonna be, cause you gotta' be somebody.