

Valedictorian address

All protocols having been observed, good evening.

Words are inadequate to fully express the abiding gratitude I feel, having been selected this year's valedictorian, and to deliver this address on behalf of the graduating class. However, given that words are all that I have, I am constrained to make due.

Response to Justice Kokaram

To you, Justice Kokaram, I assure you that the issues you have raised have, and continues to engage the minds of those sitting here, and many who aspire to reach this point. Indeed, they touch and concern us, persons close to us, and the fraternity we aspire to.

The Jones Case

As regional nationals, and future counsel, the Jones cases and the issues therein are important to all of us.

Regardless of opinions on whether the entry stipulations to the region's law schools should change, it seems clear that there needs to at least a conversation on the subject, and that each of us needs to be a fervent participant in that conversation.

Cost

Aside from issues of acceptance procedure, there is also the issue of cost, and space.

Financial limitations cut across jurisdictions, in some cases constraining the ability of persons otherwise qualified to attend law school from doing so.

Against this backdrop, the governments of the various jurisdictions which, through scholarships and various financial assistance schemes, helped us to achieve this milestone, and who intend to continue helping others to do the same must be commended.

At the same time, we must note that issues of cost and space have prompted calls for additional law schools in different jurisdictions. These calls must be seen as valid, but must be considered against the rationale underlining the idea of regional law schools.

INTEGRATION.

We will soon be admitted to the Bar in our various jurisdictions, and when in practice, we can call on Deshon Griffith of Barbados, Rondelle Keller of Trinidad and Tobago, and Arthur Thomas from Antigua and Barbuda for guidance on law or updates on legal developments in these jurisdictions.

We can also call on these persons for place to stay on one of my coming crop over or carnival trips. Guys, take notice.

Indeed, the networks built, and comradery forged during our years at Hugh Wooding are every bit as important as the LEC's we receive tonight. Do not forget this.

Regarding the Hadeed case...

Indeed, there is merit in seeking to establish a system which upholds the dignity of the human person and respects the principles of social justice. Recognition of these necessities does not make a solution, however, any less elusive.

Resolution of the issues raised in Hadeed v AG was overdue. This legal solution, however, simultaneously condemned countless persons who sought admission to the Trinidad Bar by an alternative means to limbo, and uncertainty, a state of affairs which cannot be ignored.

But, Justice Kokaram recognised in his judgment, the solution is a political one, to be remedied by the branch of government vested with powers to make, maintain, and amend legislation.

Our roles in this process is to remain vigilant regarding laws being promulgated by our respective legislatures, ensuring that they achieve social justice, but which also have a foundation in fertile jurisprudential ground.

As I look to my colleagues, I am certain that they are ready, and willing to answer the charge given to us this evening. I look to examples set the likes of Michael Munroe, and Frances Carryl, my classmates and countrymen, Rico Yearwood, a second year Barbadian student, and Deshon Griffith, who also graduates today, and I know that we are in good hands.

To the graduates

Yes, these things are important, and are to be addressed. But tonight is not about these things. Tonight, is about us.

Former classmates, colleagues, and fellow future attorneys-at-law, look around you, and revel. Tonight represents the culmination of no less than five (5) years of hard work, sacrifice, and dedication. So tonight we celebrate these things.

But we also celebrate the love, support, and confidence poured onto us by the ones without whom this would not be possible.

Tonight you left your seats and approached those steps. You heard YOUR name. You walked across this stage and collected your prize, some of you with tears in your eyes. But you were not crying alone.

You may not have seen it but your parents, your siblings, your aunts, uncles, grandparents were crying with you. They felt pride with you, they felt happiness with you tonight the same way they have always been with you.

For years they stayed up late nights with you while you studied. They served as alarm clocks when your body was too drained to be roused by the 15 alarms you set but usually slept through. They felt the anxiety and apprehension with you before exams and when results were released.

They mortgaged their land, houses and cars to pay your tuitions. Put themselves in debt to buy your books, rent your apartments, and ensure that you could eat. And some of them, put their lives on hold to ensure that you could make significant progress with yours.

As such, to these people I say that tonight belongs to you as much as it belongs to us, so on behalf of the class of 2019 I say, thank you.

I commend the following points to you:

1. Like John Snow, you know nothing;
2. You are first, and last, an officer of the court first

You know nothing

Your graduating was never an entitlement, and never guaranteed. You are here tonight through perseverance, many sleepless nights, much crying, and going back and forth deciding whether you deserve to be here.

This perseverance, and what it was wrought is reason for celebration, for jubilation, for happiness.

Each person here tonight is permitted to share in the celebration. Indeed, our individual stories may be different. Our paths may have varied, but the culmination those efforts converge on this night.

In 2017 we passed through the doors of the Hugh Wooding Law School not really knowing what to expect.

Despite the piecemeal advice some of us received, nothing could really prepare us for what was in store, and I, for one, still suffer whiplash from the break neck speed at which our massive workloads greeted us.

Mrs. Charles-Sylvester in particular, who will forever occupy a place our hearts, demonstrated to many of us that we were not as meticulous as we previously thought. And after a year, and many, many, MANY tutorials, after we assumed that we had utilised her instructions to mature into the detail oriented young legal minds she had molded us to be, Question 1 of the May 2018 Paper, which I might add, still haunts my dreams, humbled the best among us, reminding me at least, that all the preparation in the world counts for nothing in the absence of proper execution.

Our lessons in Legal Drafting and Interpretation with the Mrs. Nalini Persad-Salick quickly revealed our limitations regarding our approach to interpretation, and, for me at least, this revelation brought home the fact that my ability to properly dispatch my duties as an attorney-at-law, is necessarily limited by ability to extend my knowledge.

Eventually we overcame the tragedy that was first year and its many traumas, only to suffer the abuse which awaited us at the hands of Conveyancing and Probate Practice and Procedure. Despite these scars, however, Mr. Maharaj, or Mrs. Allahar, I bear no ill will.

Even further, after we overcame the deception of being led to think three hours of mandatory overtime in legal aid was sufficient to dispatch out duties, we experienced but a taste of the time, care, and control required to properly manage the three or four files that we were given.

Now we have conquered all these trials. We have climbed mountains and crossed oceans. We have been tested in ways we never before even contemplated and we have made it through. We are...at the other side.

Now, it is my distinct honour, no, privilege, to say to us, that we have not arrived. We have not made it. Indeed, you are not in possession of even a fraction of the knowledge and skill needed to be proficient counsel. The LEC we now receive amounts to training wheels. Indeed, of all the things law schools ought to have taught us, to my mind, the most profound lesson is how much we do not know, and in that sense, we share much with John Snow.

There is therefore a need to remain relentless in our pursuit of knowledge and skill, for us to remain diligent in our pursuit of proficiency and to remain teachable, being always willing to learn. To remain humble, and patient. For those of you who seek glory, this is not it. This is merely your ticket to a chance. Use it wisely.

An officer of the court

From this day forward, we cast of our ID tags for robes. We substitute courtrooms for classrooms, and our tutors are replaced with judges

We no longer tarry for grades and classifications of competent, Instead, we now tarry for the best interest of our clients

We tarry for the preservation of public confidence in the profession, but above all, we tarry for the preservation of the integrity of, and public confidence in the our individual and collective judicial systems as we strive to establish, and maintain an indigenous jurisprudence as profound as any around the world

And as we amble toward these goals, I implore each one of us to protect, with every fibre of your being, your reputation, your integrity, for indeed it is truly, your most prized possession in this profession.

To do this, our major, or main motivator should not, no, must not be remuneration.

Yes, you have to live, and live you shall, but remember, history is replete with examples which show that a pursuit of law, and indeed any profession, which is fueled solely by aspirations for riches has prompted many to forget the ethical, and even legal limitations which bind them.

We need not look too far for examples of the product of empty aspiration of financial plenty and status.

Colleagues, we indeed aspire to a noble profession. But the nobility associated with the profession does truly not flow from merely being part of the profession, let alone the remuneration one can potentially secure. It does not flow from the suits and outfits you will wear, and how they will make you appear. It does not flow from the professional title you will bear upon admission to the bar. It does not flow from the fancy vehicles this profession may permit you to purchase. It does not flow from the lavish life style it will afford you, or the important members of society who may hold you in high esteem because you are attorneys-at-law.

These things are incidental. Trimmings. Insignificant in the grand scheme of things. The purpose of law has always been to ensure certainty of outcomes. To regulate behaviours. To ensure predictable conduct, and with these things, to allow a people to feel protected from themselves, and when necessary, from their state.

As an officer of the court, it is your duty to assist in the facilitation of this process and you are bathed in nobility when you execute your mandate in whatever capacity that may be, satisfying your duty to the court, to the law, guided by principle, and always with an eye to the purpose for which you lawyer.

Colleagues, this step, is by no means trifling. It is by no means, insignificant. The responsibility you will be bear to client, court and the profession is great. But if you are up for the task as I know you can be, then let us together, move forward, in defiance of hurdles, in defiance of mediocrity, in defiance any expectation that we will fail or fall below the standard required.

So forget all restrictions, forget all doubt, take constructive criticism and if necessary, turn yourself about, we are capable, and the word is about to find out.