

Welcome to Northwestern Law

Remarks by Dean Daniel B. Rodriguez

At the Opening Convocation Ceremony, August 24, 2015

On behalf of the faculty and staff, I am pleased to welcome you to the Northwestern University School of Law entering class of 2015. We are looking forward to working with you during your time here and, when your studies are completed, welcoming you into the Northwestern Law family as treasured alumni.

While we look forward with anticipation to your accomplishments at Northwestern Law, you are already a very accomplished group. You come here with outstanding academic credentials of course, but also equally outstanding backgrounds and experience.

While it is customary at law school orientations to describe some of the exceptional new students and great experiences so many of you have had prior to law school, we have become convinced in recent years that you are best served by getting to know one another informally and through your own interactions in the coming days. For what it's worth, I certainly encourage you to do so. You are all in this together and it will be a great, and quite enjoyable, part of your transition to law school to learn about your classmates and to share your experiences, your backgrounds, and your perspectives.

To those of you who have come from outside the Midwest, welcome to the Second City, the Windy City, the City of Big Shoulders, My Kind of Town, the City That Never Sleeps (wait, that's New York City). In any case, welcome to Chicago. I myself am a transplant from the west coast, by way of the southwest, and I know that moving to Chicago is a big step. With all that one hears about our fair city, including the serious Midwestern winters, you may

arrive as I did with a measure of apprehension to go along with your excitement. Let me say to you transplants that this is indeed a great city, filled with world-class culture and amenities of all sorts. It is the city of the Bears and Bulls, of Cubs and White Sox and of the world champion Chicago Blackhawks. Here in Chicago, we love our sports.

And we love our neighborhoods. Our campus is in the heart of Streeterville, a neighborhood with its own colorful history. It involves a Chicago character from a century ago, named George Streeter, who tried to claim this chunk of land as his own. His many attempts to wrangle the 186-acre plot on which the Law School's campus now sits failed, and Mr. Streeter was eventually imprisoned for selling liquor. We are ever grateful to local law enforcement for setting in motion the events that enabled us to have the most appealing urban-area law school in the nation. So, when you are down in Harry's Cafe, raise a glass to Mr. Streeter!

There are many other fascinating neighborhoods in the Chicagoland area as well and I urge you to get out and see them and enjoy everything this great city has to offer. And, as to the weather, what can I tell you? Buy a warm coat and a sturdy set of boots.

I want to say a couple of words about the institution you will join and the subject you will study. Now deep into the second half of our second century, Northwestern Law School has, as you know, a venerable tradition of excellence. Its prestige is known worldwide and its reputation has been built through the accomplishments of our distinguished graduates. Through our law school

have come governors, state judges and United States Supreme Court Justices, captains of industry, entrepreneurs, public servants, and incredibly accomplished lawyers who practice throughout the nation and across the world. Robert Todd Lincoln, the son of Abraham Lincoln, attended law school here. So did Ada Kepley, a member of the Class of 1870, the first female graduate of an American law school. The list of Northwestern Law alumni—pioneers and public servants, great lawyers and leaders—is an illustrious one indeed.

All of you are now a part of this extraordinary legacy. Yet, while we focus on our past, ours is a living history. And we are constantly building and shaping that history through our work and efforts in the here and now.

You have heard and will hear much about the “Northwestern Law Difference.” Yes, much of this is intangible, but I can summarize it like this: This is a student-centered community, one that treats law students like the adults you are and with significant ownership over your academic pursuits and your careers. The legal profession is a demanding, occasionally competitive profession, and there is every reason to believe that it will become more, rather than less, so in the coming years. Northwestern Law is fundamentally a collaborative place, a place where much of the real work takes place outside the classroom, in your interactions with your classmates, with the teams you build and nurture in coursework, and in the cooperative endeavors among students, faculty, and alumni. Our physical space is an admixture of the old and the new. And the environment of the Law School, here in the beating heart of Chicago, is a hothouse of energy and enthusiasm. With myriad student organizations, opportunities for social gatherings, often spontaneous interactions with not only law students, but with other graduate students who come down here from Evanston to take advantage of our cross-campus programs, Northwestern Law is a place in which great things happen and in which real learning takes place.

It is also an institution with relentless forward momentum. In an era in which the legal profession is changing in key ways and in which there is legitimate uncertainty about precisely what lawyers’ careers will look like five, ten, twenty years from now, it is

fundamentally important to make sure that law students are equipped with the right mix of skills and the best foundational education and practical training to flourish, to adapt, and to lead in this brave new world. Northwestern Law is responding to this dynamic landscape intentionally and strategically. It is truly a place of innovation. Innovation in spirit and in action. We have a faculty of top lawyer-educators, many with substantial interdisciplinary training and all with a passion for educating modern lawyers with modern skills. We have a curriculum that is rigorous and comprehensive, yes, but also imaginative and future-focused. We have a student body that is diverse, mature, and, while there are occasional bouts of apprehension—they are human after all—they are truly excited about the future and about their role in creating a new profession for a changing world.

We understand that the lawyer of the future will encounter a profession in which the practice of law will not be preoccupied with a separate language—legalese—cordoned off from the rest of the world. Rather, lawyers will be social engineers, managers of information, and developers of novel techniques to help facilitate the objectives of government and of the economy. Alongside all of this, they will—YOU will—continue to be the front line protectors of the rule of law and of civil rights and liberties in a world that demands just this sort of protection.

You will be lawyers working at the intersection of law, business, and technology, and I promise you that the intensive, multidisciplinary education you will receive at Northwestern Law will equip you well to be this new kind of lawyer, this professional leader for the modern age.

I envy each and every one of you in the journey you are about to begin as a law student. This is a wonderfully interesting, intellectually rich and rewarding experience and I encourage you to take advantage of all the opportunities the deep and broad study of the law affords. You will engage with complex issues in your readings and your class discussion. And I want to stress to you that the issues you study and chew over relentlessly really matter. The study of law is the study of the structure and contents of rules and institutions which foster a

civilized society. It is the study of “wise restraints” that keep us free. You will spend most of your time focused on the trees, but don’t forget about the forest. In law school, whatever your ambitions after graduation, you will focus on how we ought best to think about our legal system, our rule of law, our structure of justice, and how what we study as law students and lawyers contributes to the well-being of our civil society, both in the United States and throughout the world. And please don’t be passive about your learning. Your faculty are there to guide you and to help shape and sharpen your skills. But law school is a place to interrogate your and your colleagues’ assumptions and views, to renew, or on occasion, revisit, your values, to exercise intellectual muscles you didn’t think you had, and, in the end, to come away not only with a wealth of substantive legal knowledge, but a new framework of analyzing issues and problems—not only legal problems, but issues of concern to an ambitious, complex civil society.

In conclusion, let me again welcome you to Northwestern Law and wish you the very best in the coming weeks and months. I look forward to getting to know all of you. And as we say in these parts: Go Cats!