

Hon. Tony Evers

## GRADUATION CEREMONY REMARKS

This past spring, the Law School welcomed Tony Evers, governor of Wisconsin, as the speaker at its annual Hooding Ceremony, in the tradition of a number of past governors. Governor Evers delivered the following address to the Law School's graduates at the Milwaukee Theatre.

Thank you very much, Dean Kearney, faculty, alumni, proud parents, spouses, family members, and soon-to-be graduates—welcome and thank you so much. It's not every day that one gets to give a law school commencement address, so I am especially honored to be here to celebrate with you tonight.

When Dean Kearney reached out and asked me to speak, he made me promise that I wouldn't say anything favorable about . . . the Chicago Cubs. I'll tell you, that was about the easiest thing I've ever had to agree to in my life. But beyond that, it took me a while to figure out exactly what I *did* want to say tonight. These speeches are supposed to be inspiring, with highfalutin messages and takeaways as you close a chapter and start new exciting journeys.

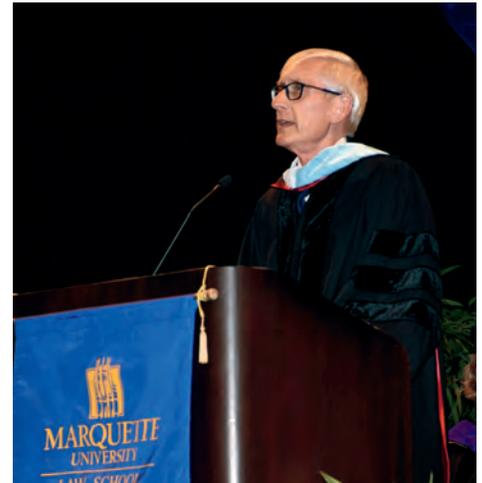
And so I thought, what the heck, maybe I'll start by asking some of my staff what they remember about speeches given at their law school graduations—

key insights that they may have taken away, things that may have inspired them. Well, go figure: Not a single one of them could remember anything from the commencement address. Some of them couldn't even remember who *gave* the commencement address at their graduation.

So after that failed mission, I decided to count on my son, Nick, a Marquette Law School graduate. I said, "Nick, your commencement ceremony was a big deal. It propelled you into the work you do today. Who was your guest speaker, and what did he or she talk about?"

"No clue," was his answer.

So the good news is I'll try to do my best to send you on your way today with some wisdom—but if you don't remember a thing I say today, tomorrow, maybe next week, or a few months from now, or years down the road, I will know not to take it personally.



Governor Tony Evers

I do have a couple pitches for you—a couple of important pitches. As recipients of the world-famous Jesuit mission around social justice, I believe that all of you have some extraordinary opportunities related to this important mission, even though most of it will be uncompensated. I recently read an article by Thomas Friedman in *The New York Times*. He wrote about the importance of “leaders without authority” in community life. These are regular folks who live in communities across the state or the nation: business leaders, entrepreneurs, people who are philanthropists, or just regular folks who are ready to lead their community toward embracing diversity, inclusion, and problem solving, even if the formal leaders, the elected officials, don't. These leaders without authority check their party politics at the door and focus only on what works. Your generation of legal professionals has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to lead both economic and societal change, not reliant on the state or federal government. That's the first pitch.

The second pitch is this: As recipients of the moral compass provided by you at Marquette, I'd like you to take an active role in the effort to reform the criminal justice system. This issue, this revolution, is beginning now and will impact us all for the rest of our lives, and the conversation is at the local and state and

national levels. And for good reasons; folks, you know this: Our criminal justice system is struggling—some say it's broken. We have far too many nonviolent people—mostly poor, or of color, or both—incarcerated in our prisons.

We have abandoned rehabilitation, training, and treatment, and replaced it with incarceration. Reentry programs struggle under the weight of the system, and frankly, in my opinion, we have forgotten what the word *redemption* means. The good news is, odd fellows such as Kim Kardashian and Donald Trump have successfully led the efforts around the federal reform effort. Now is the time to take that on locally. Whether you are practicing criminal law, or estate planning, or nonprofit work, or focusing on corporate tax planning like my son, I encourage you to be “leaders without authority” on this issue.

This is a generational opportunity, folks. I am challenging your generation of lawyers to take this on as part of your profession, part of your spare time as “leaders without authority” and, in particular, as part of your Marquette University social justice background. So those are my two “asks.” Not simple, but important.

So you think about the big picture. As students, you've spent the past three years, maybe more, finding out in excruciating, painstaking detail that the law and justice are complicated, to say the least. You've spent countless hours navigating the nuance of law, working to understand the vast gray areas that exist between black letters on a page, and possibly resenting, but hopefully also learning to appreciate, the process it takes to get to an anticlimactic “maybe.”

But to me, the concepts of law and justice can be boiled down to something pretty simple. It's a notion that we all agree on, to be bound by a set of rules. Sometimes, when a person doesn't follow those rules and another person suffers, someone has to hold the rule breaker accountable. And when a person doesn't break the rules, someone has to make sure that that person doesn't suffer a punishment. And when a person suffers because the rules aren't fair, someone has to fix the rules until they are fair. And the “someone” in all this—that's where you come in.

As political theorist Judith Shklar wrote, “[W]hen we can alleviate suffering, whatever its cause, it's passively unjust to stand by and do

nothing.” As soon-to-be attorneys and lawyers, this is the time for change for which you are now responsible. Starting today: never stand by and do nothing when there is more you can do; do good; and alleviate the suffering of others. That's it. That's the speech. Thanks so much for inviting me. ■

Joseph D. Kearney

## American Inns of Court Award

Each year, in participating federal circuits, the American Inns of Court Professionalism Award is presented to “a lawyer or judge whose life and practice display sterling character and unquestioned integrity, coupled with ongoing dedication to the highest standards of the legal profession and the rule of law.” Thomas L. Shriner, Jr., a past recipient, presented the award for the Seventh Circuit to Dean Joseph D. Kearney on May 6, 2019. The occasion was the annual dinner of the court's Judicial Conference, this year in Milwaukee at the Pfister Hotel, whose keynote was a conversation among Chief Judge Diane P. Wood, U.S. District Judge Gary S. Feinerman, and current and former Supreme Court Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Anthony M. Kennedy. Here is the text of Dean Kearney's remarks.

Thank you, Tom. Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to all involved in the Seventh Circuit Bar Association for organizing this year's conference. It is most impressive. It's also a particular honor to be recognized alongside tonight's pro bono award recipients. I very much look forward to those presentations.



Taylor Brisco, Khatija Choudhry, Ash Castro, and Anna Gage at the Hooding Ceremony