

Western New England University
Graduate Commencement Speech
May 19, 2024; 3:00PM
Mass Mutual Center, Springfield, MA

Good afternoon. Thank you, President Johnson, for the kind introduction and for the warm welcome back to the Golden Bear community. It is a pleasure to join friends, family, and faculty as we celebrate the graduation of Western New England University's Graduate Class of 2024.

Western New England University continues to be a leader in academics, scholarship, and service. This school continues to attract and develop the next generation of researchers, scholars, and business leaders, and perhaps equally as important — caring and compassionate community members.

A special thanks to all of the Western New England faculty and staff whose commitment has made that possible by teaching, challenging, and shaping today's graduates. The Class of 2024 arrived ready to learn — about business, healthcare, education, agriculture, the arts, and the sciences. Whatever their area of focus, they depart ready to make a difference in the world. They have you to thank for that.

I'd also like to recognize those faculty members that were mentors and trusted friends during my time at the WNE University School of Law: Professor Julie Steiner and retired Professors Bruce Miller and Art Wolf. Thank you for always supporting students in pursuing their passions and believing that a farm girl with aspirations to someday lead in agricultural policy could accomplish anything she set her mind to. I'm living out that dream, and I couldn't have done it without your unwavering support.

It's a tremendous honor to be a part of today's ceremonies, having walked this same journey 10 years ago when I earned my Juris Doctorate from WNE. My three years on campus were filled with building relationships with professors and classmates, participating in externships and extracurricular activities, and memories made inside and outside of the classroom. The lessons learned and skills gained were fostered by professors who genuinely cared not only about our success as students, but as adults entering our careers and the difference we would make in our communities and on those around us. Above all, those professors and faculty instilled in us the values that are rare in leaders and set us apart in today's workplace: empathy, compassion, and authenticity.

My time at Western New England University highlighted the importance of community and fostered a deep appreciation among students with different backgrounds, lived experiences, and career aspirations. We were empowered and encouraged to make a difference in the world around us and to allow our passions to power us into our careers, regardless of what they may have been. Remaining actively involved on my family's fifth-generation dairy farm, it wasn't unusual to tell my professors I would be missing class to go to a fair, not for the rides or food, but to exhibit my dairy cattle in competitions. I was grateful they supported me in these endeavors, and some even asked if they could visit to see my beautiful bovines in action! It was this sense of community and culture that set an example for my career path.

I didn't realize how much my time and experiences at Western New England transformed my personal and professional career growth until I reflected on the summer before my 3L year. I had the opportunity to live and work in Vermont, interning with the VT Agency of Natural Resources. This was my first time working in state government, an internship opportunity that came to me while waitressing one evening and talking with the guests seated in my section. I told them about my goal to work in environmental law and policy, and the woman informed me that she was an attorney and hiring for a summer intern. We exchanged information and, after completing the interview process, I was selected for the internship.

That summer, I was able to work on timely legal issues that were impacting farms, residents, and communities across Vermont. I applied the skills and knowledge from my first two years of law school to draft legal memoranda advising the agency on proposed policy amendments regarding sources of pollution to state waterways. I participated in discussions to hear firsthand how policy changes would impact individuals and businesses, as well as the environment. It was that summer that I discovered the power of policy and how meaningful it can be when a group of dedicated public servants work together to effect positive change.

I didn't follow the traditional trajectory of entering private practice or becoming a public defender upon graduation, but rather sought to combine my passion for agriculture and public policy through government service. I recognized that I found the most joy in public service and being able to give back to an industry that has provided me with countless memories, leadership opportunities, and lifelong connections. The Nobel Prize recipient and Indian writer Tagore summarized it well when he said, "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted, and behold, service was joy." Gratitude is the invariable companion of joy, and I'm grateful for my education, experiences, and a career that truly brings me joy.

Today, my professional work is dedicated to advocating for Massachusetts farmers and helping to ensure they can remain viable and sustainable with each new growing season. At the surface level, farms are raising livestock or growing crops to ensure we have a resilient local food system, but ultimately, they are cultivating community. Connecting consumers to where and how their food is produced while navigating the challenges of a changing climate. With each apple picked or gallon of milk bottled, farms are building community within their towns, with their neighbors, and with consumers across the state and region. And when tough times hit, they rally to protect and preserve a way of life that is often taken for granted, not just because it is their livelihood, but because they are committed to the essential role farms play in their community.

I witnessed firsthand the power of community last year when the devastations of climate change impacted thousands of acres of farmland, resulting in millions of dollars of crops lost at family farms across the Bay State. 2023 was an unprecedented year for Massachusetts farmers, impacted by a February deep freeze, May frost, and flood events that started in July and continued into the fall. Farmers' crops for the season were lost in a matter of days, and many did not know how they would continue their operations into the next season. While farmers are known for their perseverance and resiliency, there is only so much they can prepare for, financially and operationally.

After spending several days walking in fields surveying damage with farmers, legislators, and colleagues, we knew that something had to be done to assist our unsung heroes. In less than ten days from when the floods first hit, community organizations came together to start the MA Farm Resiliency Fund to raise funds to help with the short-term, immediate needs of farms. By September, over \$3M had been raised and distributed to farms across Western and Central MA. At the same time, the Healey-Driscoll administration and Massachusetts legislature worked together to pass legislation that provided \$20M in direct aid to the farmers. I was privileged to be at the table for the crafting of these responses, helping educate my colleagues about the urgency of the situation for farmers, and learning from them about how to leverage state support to address the need. This was the first time in the state's history that direct aid had been provided to farmers due to natural disaster impacts. My department distributed the funds rapidly, and farmers have stated that they would not be in business this year but for the collaborative efforts that took place. It was a historic moment for our agricultural community, and it demonstrated what is possible when we put politics, egos, and personal biases aside.

That success was a result of more than just smart policy – it was because all of those involved believed in the power of community and had lived experiences that proved that power. As you pursue your individual professional endeavors, remember to be united in making a positive difference in the communities you live and work in. Take time to volunteer. Participate in the charity run or walk that your office hosts. Mentor a new colleague in your office. Be a force of good.

This sense of service was instilled in me through my many years of being involved with 4-H, the country's largest youth development organization. Through my county's 4-H dairy club, I volunteered at the local food pantry and met individuals facing food insecurity, some who were familiar faces in the community. We'd gather on weekends to help with roadside clean-up efforts to ensure that not only the environment was pristine, but also that animals were safe from consuming harmful waste. And throughout the year, we'd partner with local businesses to help with painting, yard work, and routine upkeep projects. While volunteering can be personally satisfying, the greater effect it has on community members is even more impactful.

I remember several of my professors at Western New England encouraging us to give back to the community and helping us to find ways to make a positive impact on and off campus. During my 1L year, Professor Miller told me about a local organization where his wife worked that provides support to women facing domestic violence. Each December, the organization hosts a 5K run to raise funds for this important cause. While always a sports enthusiast, I had never been a runner.

I decided to start running the summer before my 2L year, with both the motivation to compete and raise funds for the organization and to help with my own mental health and stress. Professor Miller would see me on my runs around campus and in nearby neighborhoods between classes and always offer encouragement. "Way to go" or "Great pace" were often shouted from his car window as he drove by. That December, I raised several hundred dollars through the generosity of friends and family and competed in my first 5K. The support of Professor Miller helped ignite a fire within me to not be deterred by a challenge. I've now run that same race seven times since graduating in 2014, and I've trained and completed four marathons to raise funds for organizations that I care deeply about.

Whatever your path in life, leave room to participate, to pursue goals rooted in the common good. Regardless of whether the solution takes place in the public or private sectors, at the grassroots or in corporate boardrooms, on your turf or others', help transcend differences. Collaboration is our strongest currency and will only get stronger through each of your individual and collective efforts. Be willing to do what's right despite opposition.

Congratulations, Class of 2024, on reaching this milestone. I know that your time at Western New England University has been a catalyst for growth, pushing you beyond your comfort zones to reach new heights and foster connections that will serve you well beyond today. I challenge you to continue to sow the seeds of success in your future endeavors and build community wherever your paths may lead you.

Thank you again for this honor and opportunity to speak at this special institution of higher learning.