

## **COMMENCEMENT REMARKS**

**AMY FLIEGELMAN OLLI:** Good morning, everyone.

Thank you, Provost Celovsky, for the kind words.

And thank you to the Board of Trustees, Faculty and Staff, Students and Distinguished Guests of Western New England University.

And finally thank you to President Johnson for your visionary and inspirational leadership of this school.

As a proud alumna of Western New England School of Law, it's an honor to address you all today.

Now, I'm well aware that I am the last person standing between you and your diplomas.

So, today, I'll try to accomplish one of the most difficult tasks a lawyer can undertake: I will be brief.

Class of 2025: Congratulations. You survived!

You survived sleepless nights and endless lectures... early-morning classes and late-night study sessions... group projects and final exams.

You even passed that one class you still don't totally get. (For me, it was Civil Procedure)

Of course, you didn't make it to this day alone.

There were so many people who supported you... advised you... reassured you during those 2 a.m. breakdowns.

And many of those people are here today, cheering you on.

So: Let's return the favor... and give your loved ones a big round of applause.

[Lead applause]

Class of 2025: Today—first and foremost—is a celebration of your success.

You took on a challenge. You faced down obstacles. And you triumphed.

But today—in the few minutes I have—I want to focus on a different topic.

In fact, I want to talk to you about the opposite of what we're all here to celebrate.

Not success... but failure.

Because I believe deeply that what will shape your careers most meaningfully in the years to come will not be what you achieve with your successes... but rather what you take from your failures.

When I was your age, I was terrified of failure.

I had a mountain of student loan debt... and no safety net. I'd just spent almost a decade in school... and now, it was time to prove that all the hard work was worth it. And, to some degree, to prove that I was worth it.

Literally and figuratively, I didn't feel like I could afford to fail.

And for a long time, that's how I approached my work.

I played it safe. And I followed the rules. Because failure didn't feel like an option.

And then, horror of horrors, I got fired.

I was eight years into a General Counsel job at a medium-sized software company.

(For the non-law folks, a General Counsel is basically the head lawyer for an organization.)

Now: Let me just tell you, this company had every problem known to man.

You name it; I dealt with it.

In eight years, they ran through three CEOs... all with different personalities... but every one of whom I managed to form a good working relationship with.

Then, our fourth CEO showed up. And it was not a good match.

We only agreed on one thing: I wasn't fond of him. And he wasn't fond of me.

But even so, I couldn't imagine leaving. It was my first General Counsel job. And I wasn't sure what would happen if I jumped ship.

So, I stuck it out and tried to make it work.

And then one day, the CEO showed up in my office, thanked me for my years of service, and fired me on the spot.

It was devastating.

And.

It ended up being one of the best things that ever happened to me.

Before I was fired, I'd been considering taking a new job in California—it would have been more responsibility, with a bigger team, and in a more creative industry with more opportunity.

But even with all the pluses... I was planning to turn it down. It was just too much of a risk.

Well, change of plans!

I took the job. We moved to Silicon Valley. And the next few years proved to be some of the most exciting, fulfilling, and professionally rewarding of my life.

The thing I feared most... failure... turned out to be an extraordinary gift.

Class of 2025: In the years ahead, I wish you every blessing and every success.

But no matter what I wish for you... no matter how hard you plan or prepare... failures will come.

Big ones! Painful ones!

And that's okay.

Because, in a strange and wonderful way, failure often teaches us lessons that success cannot.

Here's one lesson that getting fired taught me:

For the early part of my career, I let many of my decisions be guided by a single, overriding mantra: "Don't mess up."

(Actually, when I used to say that mantra in my head, I used a different four-letter word. But I know some of you have younger siblings here. So, for today, it'll be "Don't mess up.")

Then, I messed up... because I knew deep down inside that it was time to go. And I'd let someone else make that decision for me.

But it freed me.

Getting fired allowed me to feel comfortable taking a big, bold risk... traveling across the country to accept a job in a new company and a new industry... a job I wasn't sure I was well equipped for.

Because: What's the worst that could happen? I'd get fired again?

Been there, done that.

There's a paradoxical relationship between success, failure, and risk-taking.

If you try to avoid failure completely, you'll never take risks... and if you never take risks, you'll never win big.

Success requires risk-taking, which requires a willingness to fail.

Now, I want to be careful here: I'm not saying that you should go out and take reckless risks.

Wear your seat belt. Put on sunscreen. Don't sign a contract without reading it first.

But you can—and should—be willing to take smart risks.

Most lawyers are cautious... to a fault. I used to be too. But getting fired changed that.

Now, every time I face a choice with a potential downside, I ask myself two questions: What's the worst that could happen? And what's the likelihood that occurs?

If the downside isn't overwhelming... I go for it. And I recommend you do the same.

Assess your situation... and then, more often than not, just go for it!

Take that job. Start that business. Take that leap.

Because here's the flip side of that paradox: It's the people who are willing to fail... in smart and intentional ways... who most often win big.

Graduates: At the beginning of my remarks, I promised I would be brief.

So, I'll end with this.

From this day, each of you will chart your own paths out into the world.

But no matter what path you take... no matter where you go from here... I urge you: Be brave.

If failure is an unavoidable part of our common human experience... you might as well fail trying something bold.

You get one big, messy, glorious life. The mistakes and missteps will make you who you are.

What our world needs most from you is not perfection... it's persistence.

We need people who have the guts to keep going, even when they don't have it figured out.

And I assure you: Nobody anywhere really has it figured out.

So, you have just as good a shot as anyone.

Class of 2025: Congratulations again on this extraordinary accomplishment.

May your lives be filled with many successes. And many successful failures.

Thank you, all.