

Thank you.

Let me say to you, Dean Richard Revesz, to the Board of Trustees, to the faculty and distinguished guests and especially to the graduates of this wonderful institution and your families, thank you for giving me the honor of joining you today.

You, the Class of 2012, came to NYU School of Law as achievers, and you leave here as achievers. I could brag on all of you. Some of you have already argued a case before a distinguished panel of appellate judges, including Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. Some of you have clerkships and other prestigious jobs awaiting. I note that four of you have received Equal Justice Fellowships and at least one of you will soon start work at the U.S. Department of Justice in the Attorney General's Honors Program. Being from North Carolina, I am particularly proud of NYU Law for continuing to dominate Columbia Law School in the Dean's Cup competition. You are indeed a distinguished group of graduates. Carry it proudly for the rest of your lives.

Today, you enter the greatest profession in the world. Throughout your time here, you have enjoyed the steady presence of family and friends who gave you the love, the support and the fortitude to be here on this great day, and I invite you now to show them your appreciation.

Let me tell you three stories that encompass bits of insight I have gained along the way.

The first story is about the immense power of law to change things for the better. I am a fifth generation North Carolinian. I can trace my family back to a seven year old girl who was sold on an auction block in Carthage, North Carolina in the 1860s. In those days, our laws treated her as chattel, a piece of property to be bought and sold like furniture. She grew up to have a son who came into the world after passage of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments. While no longer under the scourge of slavery, the family still faced disadvantages – no resources and no education and thus no prospects for upward mobility. Still, her son managed a fifth grade education. A generation later, in a small segregated schoolhouse with books handed down from the white school across town, all 14 of his children went to college and many of them, like my grandmother, became educators themselves. In 1954, the Brown decision desegregated schools and cracked the door in education, enabling the next generation of my family to go even further.

I came along in 1971. In that same year, the Supreme Court decided *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, a landmark case in which the court affirmed busing as a means of implementing Brown. As communities across the country reacted to this decision, sometimes violently, something different happened in Charlotte. While the decision was not popular and many white families opted out of the public school system following it, other families, including some of the wealthiest and most successful business people, saw the decision as a turning point for Charlotte and the fragile thread that bound our community together. A small group of the most influential white families decided to send their kids not only to the newly integrated school district but to a formerly segregated black high school. This is something that was almost unheard of – anywhere in the United States. They knew that doing so would make it okay for other white families to do the same. By the time I entered school, the community had gained a reputation as the city that made integration work.

The same system of laws that made it possible for my great-great grandmother to be sold into slavery later made it possible for me to gain a strong education and five generations later to be the mayor of the largest city in North Carolina.

As a profession, we cannot take that legacy for granted. I wish for you that you will accept not only the privileges of being a lawyer but the responsibility to help our nation and world grapple with the challenges of the moment.

The second story is about being stubborn when you are convinced about your path. I learned that lesson as a twelve year old. At that age, I saw a shiny new science museum opened in downtown Charlotte. While I knew very little about science, I was fascinated by community volunteers who had signed up to share their knowledge with anyone who came through the door. I decided right then that I wanted to be a volunteer, too. So, I filled out a volunteer form and waited. I heard nothing. So, I went back a week later and filled out another form. Still nothing. I did this for three or four weeks in a row until finally I went to the museum, found a door cracked behind the aquarium, pick up a bucket and a squeegee and started working. I had no idea what I was doing but I went on for another hour. Finally, the executive director called me to her office, sat me down and explained that I was too young to work for them. But then, she said something else, "Because you have shown such initiative, I am going to let you work here anyway." That's how I got my first job.

I needed to stay the course again 25 years later when I ran my first campaign for mayor. The previous mayor, who had been in the office for a record 14 years, decided to retire and picked his successor, a local businessman who had more than 20 years of experience in local elected office compared to my four. The campaign proved grueling -- 40 debates, more than the candidates for President in 2008. Meanwhile, my opponent -- who had an enormous machine behind him -- developed a three to one financial advantage over me, and even many of my best supporters began to doubt my ability to win. So, with only eight weeks to go, I not only stayed in the fight; I fought harder. By the end of the campaign, we eliminated my opponent's financial advantage, had more volunteers knocking on doors and making phone calls for us and won the election by 3500 votes.

Shortly after the election, I had to stay the course again as Charlotte -- despite being the 17th largest city in the United States, the second largest financial center, home to the sixth busiest airport in the world and an all-around great place -- was considered an underdog for hosting the Democratic National Convention in 2012. During the course of the pursuing the Convention, I was relentless. During this time, I must have seen the President eight times, and each time, I said the same thing, "Mr. President, I am Anthony Foxx from Charlotte, and I would like to host the Convention." By the eighth time, I knew I had made an impression when, having begun with "Mr. President, I am Anthony Foxx from Charlotte," he interrupted me and said, "I know, I know, you want to host the DNC Convention." On February 1, 2011, Charlotte was announced as the site for the 2012 Convention, and it will be our city's first introduction to many in the U.S. and around the world to our great city.

I wish for you that, in every important endeavor, when you feel pushed against the wall of futility, that you find enough resilience to accomplish things you never thought you could.

Own Your Career

The final story has to do with owning your career.

For a guy who grew up in a house of school teachers, I was never more financially comfortable than during my years in private practice. I liked what I was doing but I didn't love it. As I went along, new opportunities emerged but generally amounted to a change of scenery, not a change in course. For several years, I had no idea what was gnawing at me. Then, one of my colleagues, another NYU Law graduate Albert Diaz, received a state judicial appointment to the fill an unexpired term. The only problem was that the term expired in a matter of months, and he had to run a full campaign to keep his seat. He had never run a campaign before, nor had I. But I agreed to be his treasurer, and I loved it. Not being the treasurer! I loved the campaign. I enjoyed putting a campaign together, building a team, working towards a goal and even the brutal finality that election day brings. We lost that campaign but Al turned out fine – he got another state court appointment and just a few years ago became the first Latino judge appointed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit. A year later, I managed a congressional campaign. A year after that, I was recruited to run for City Council in Charlotte.

By that time, it had all been fun and games but now I had to go to my law firm and ask for support to run for a part-time elected position. Thankfully, albeit with some reluctance, they gave it. I cut my hours back, froze my pay and created space for what I loved. I won the election.

What I love about elected public service is what I always thought I would love about a traditional law practice: researching issues, developing a theory of the case, boiling the case down well enough to be understood by others and bringing that case to the ultimate jury – the voting public.

How do we talk about housing the poor?

How do we develop the courage to pay for and build a 21st century infrastructure?

How do we grow jobs following a devastating recession?

How do we ensure that the next generation of American children have the tools to compete in the global economy?

These are just a few questions I found myself tackling on a daily basis, and the closer I got to the answers, the more I realized that I had come so much closer to the person I aspired when I entered law school. Every day, I found, the tools of our trade helped me make the case.

Years later, running for mayor seemed like a good idea politically but it would put me in the position of really having to choose between my career as a practicing lawyer and a public servant. I took what might have been considered an ill-advised route and ran. I followed my passion, believing that I would do better with something I loved to do than in something I liked to do. Since taking office, I have worked to:

Reduce the unemployment rate from 10.2% in December 2009 to 8.1% today.

Charlotte has experienced its lowest crime rate since we started keeping statistics.

Charlotte became the first city in the world to implement a greenhouse gas reduction program in its central business district, and by 2016, we will have reduced the carbon footprint of 19 million square feet of commercial space by 20 percent.

Successfully passed the largest and second largest transportation bonds in the city's history, putting people back to work and building a 21st century infrastructure with bridges, streets, rail, bicycle and pedestrian facilities.

Increased investment in affordable housing by 50% and engaged in innovative rapid rehousing programs targeted at homeless and near-homeless families.

Grown the city youth employment program from 48 kids to 3200 kids on an annual basis.

Engaged the Charlotte business community to improve our schools by backing a five-year \$55 million privately funded effort to reform and improve failing schools and the children who attend them.

Creating a new support system for small businesses and entrepreneurs by improving access to city contracts, expanding the city small business loan fund, cutting red tape and developing an innovative public-private partnership to seed new businesses in Charlotte.

These are just a few things that one can do at a local government level to make an impact.

Whatever your chosen path, I wish for you to strive towards those pursuits that bring you satisfaction and happiness.

As I have mentioned, you are achievers by nature – all of you in your own right – and I am confident that there is no merit badge that your ingenuity, competitive spirit and work ethic cannot obtain. However, from this point forward, life is more art than science. I urge you to take ownership of your career.

What you do from now on will lay the foundation for future opportunities. If you make widgets all day, eventually you will get offers from other places to make widgets. Please don't be the widget.