

Governor Phil Murphy

Commencement Address for the 173rd Commencement Ceremony of the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School

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Remarks As Prepared For Delivery

- Sunday, May 18, 2025 -

Good morning!

It is an absolute honor to be with you, today, to celebrate graduates of one of the finest legal institutions in the entire world.

But, just making sure — you do know I'm a Wharton guy, right?

So, no. I don't have a law degree. I mean, I know some lawyers. Nice folks. Smart.

I have an MBA, which means I have just enough obnoxious brass to tell people with law degrees what to do.

I'm here with my wife, Tammy. We live in Jersey, but closer to New York City. By the way, how is Saquon doing?

But, hey, this is gonna go great. And if not, well, you can find me throwing back Jamo's at New Deck.

Seriously, it is incredibly meaningful to be back in the city of brotherly love. I have lived it here. I have learned it here. I have loved it here.

To Dean Lee, and to all of your colleagues at the Penn Carey Law School: Thank you for inviting me to join you on this joyous and celebratory day.

To all of the proud parents, family members, and loved ones, here with us: Thank you for raising and supporting the next generation of lawyers, scholars, changemakers, and leaders — who are the very future of our nation and our world.

And, most importantly, to the class of 2025: Congratulations! I know every single one of you has worked your tails off. We could not be more proud of you. You have earned this glorious moment.

I want to acknowledge something incredibly unique – and highly commendable – about the Penn Carey Law School and all of you, in this year’s graduating class.

Over the past few years, each one of you has had the privilege of being immersed in a campus where collegiality is revered and cross-disciplinary learning is cherished.

And as you embark on your next life chapter, let me tell you: those two values will serve you well.

And, collegiality and cross-disciplinary learning are not abstract virtues. They reflect two fundamental ideals that are sorely lacking in our world today: Kindness and curiosity.

Commencement ceremonies are usually a time to look forward. But, I want to take this opportunity to salute all of you for the work you have already done to live up to those two values.

Among the more than 430 of you graduating today, you have performed over 25,000 hours of pro bono work with efforts like the Custody and Support Assistance Clinic and the Financial Literacy Project.

Each one of those hours represents kindness in action.

And, many of you are graduating today with a joint degree. By the way, to those of you who will soon hold diplomas from both Penn Carey Law and Wharton: Thanks a lot. I now feel like Pee Wee Herman.

But honestly, your devotion to cross-disciplinary learning – that is curiosity in action.

So, the reality is: you are already models of what the world needs today.

But now, naturally, comes the next step.

When you meld kindness with curiosity, there is a clear conclusion – or, more accurately, a call to action.

And that is having the courage to take unexpected paths in life while always bringing the best version of yourself along for the ride.

I think the magic formula is simple: Follow your curiosity, wherever it may lead you, and do so with an open-mind and a spirit of kindness.

Now, imagine for a second a straight line between points A and B. Or, between today and your next horizons.

But, wait a minute.

Life is almost never like that.

And that’s a good thing.

In my own life, I have learned to welcome the unpredictable bends in my professional journey. And, I am far from alone.

Frankly, that's the only way somebody can go, in my case, from working in finance to domestic politics to international diplomacy and then to state government.

And your willingness to enthusiastically embrace the unexpected turns in life is especially important today.

I'm sure you've heard this more than you can count: we are living in an unprecedented — and unpredictable — time.

And as lawyers, you will soon be charged with making sense of, at times, a senseless world.

It is a big challenge. And one, I may add, you did not ask for.

But it is also an opportunity.

To lead.

To rebuild institutions — or to build new ones altogether.

Or, simply: to be a force for justice.

And this campus, your professors, your peers — they have all prepared you for this opportunity. Perhaps in ways you may have never predicted.

I mean, when I first arrived at UPenn, I never would have imagined that some of the most valuable lessons I would learn would not be in the classroom.

The good. The bad. The ugly.

From navigating the scourge of urban decay, in Philadelphia circa 1981, to the shocking suicide of a dear friend and classmate, to the absurdity and campiness of the Wharton Follies theatrical revue.

Just like you, we had it all.

By the way, on the subject of theater: There are worse training grounds for a career in government and politics.

As Governor, I put the lessons I learned as a theater junkie into practice virtually every day.

Performing onstage taught me how to think on my feet. How to stay cool when meetings go off script. How to overcome stage fright before a big press event.

So, when you go on to be sworn in as a judge or Cabinet Secretary, don't be surprised if the person holding the Bible is the former president of the Penn Carey Law Comedy and Improv Club.

Many of you, perhaps most, will go on to assume some of the most influential positions of power in the legal world.

And when you take on these roles, you will soon discover that the people around you will hang on your every word.

When you enter a room, heads will turn.

So, when you enter those rooms, a favor please: don't just claim your own seat at the table. Make room for more.

Welcome new voices into the conversation.

Seek insights from those who are too often told to stay quiet.

I have often found that the smartest people I know are those who offer fewer opinions and ask more questions.

And this is not just the right way to be. It is the smart approach for succeeding in life.

But don't take my word for it.

Just ask your peers on the Penn Carey Law Softball Club, who were declared the champions of this year's UVA Law School Softball Invitational!

And I want to give an extra special shout out to the club's co-captain, Jared Turner.

In reflecting on the club's victory, Jared said, "We do things a little bit differently than many of the other schools... Instead of limiting the number of students who can join us at the tournament, we try to make the [event] open and accessible to as many interested... students as possible."

Well, Jared – to you and your teammates: Thank you for proving that when we lead with open minds and open hearts, we bring out the best in each other.

That's the good news. On the less good front, Jared entered the transfer portal. And, he's taking his NIL fortune to Cravath.

Kindness and curiosity are not just cushy ideals – they are key ingredients in the recipe for victory.

And that sentiment applies to contexts that may not be as straightforward as a softball tournament.

As experts in the system of justice, you will soon be faced with challenges that are harder to answer than a question on Constitutional Law from Professor Kermit Roosevelt.

So, for those of you who hope to enter public service or government, in particular, I want to offer a few specific pieces of advice:

When it comes to sensitive decision-making, do yourself a favor: Keep the convo off Signal.

If someone seeks your services in exchange for small, unmarked bills in a brown paper bag, turn around, walk away, and don't look back. Trust me on this, I'm from Jersey.

But, when it comes to the more common challenges you will face, in the years ahead, let me say this:

If you ever find yourself in a position where you are forced to choose between the demands of a job and the demands of your conscience, always follow your head and your heart, even when they lead you down an unexpected, maybe an

uncertain, or even dangerous, path.

In that spirit, and in the spirit of keeping this relatively short, because it's never a good idea to go on too long with a crowd that makes a living in six-minute blocks.

I want to leave you with the story of one of my personal heroes. Someone I first learned about during my time as U.S. Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany. Someone who answered the call of his own conscience, despite the great risks he faced.

His name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

He was a German, Lutheran pastor who had originally planned to live a life of faith and peace.

But as a young man, he traveled to the United States and worshiped at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, where his passion for social justice blossomed.

When he returned to Germany, he discovered a nation in turmoil. Hitler had consolidated power.

And Bonhoeffer was compelled to stand up and fight for justice. He was among the very few Christian leaders who stood up for the Jews and against the Third Reich.

It was not the path he had planned for. But nonetheless, he joined with his fellow dissidents, who ultimately devised a plan to overthrow the Nazi regime and assassinate Hitler.

That plan, tragically, failed. And Bonhoeffer was executed in the Flossenbürg concentration camp just weeks before it was liberated by the Allies.

Though Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life was cut short by a barbaric regime, his story offers an eternal and timeless lesson:

No matter how inconsequential our roles may seem, or how disconnected from structures of power we may feel, when we hear the call of our conscience, we must answer it. Every time.

There is a saying that is often attributed to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And whether or not he actually said it, I find it so compelling, so timeless, so relevant:

"If your opponent has a conscience, then follow Gandhi. But if your enemy has no conscience, like Hitler, then follow Bonhoeffer."

For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, taking a stand came at grave personal peril. Because in his time, the rule of law was overridden by a lawless regime.

Thankfully, today, we live in a nation whose very foundation rests on the rule of law.

And while some may try to undermine it, they cannot escape this simple truth:

Much like the lessons we can learn from Bonhoeffer, the very idea of America is eternal and timeless.

And when anyone tries to attack our justice system, what they're really attacking is the fundamental idea of America.

So, as you prepare to enter the legal field, each of you will have a part to play in ensuring that this democratic experiment — which has endured for nearly 250 years — will endure for many more to come.

So, go forth and fight for the future you envision.

Whether that means running for office, or serving as a judge or a prosecutor or a Public Defender, or committing time to pro bono work, you have the power to protect and preserve the rule of law — here at home, and around the world.

And as you begin your next chapter, please: resist the lawyerly temptation to fill in too many of the details early in your journey.

Take your time. You have plenty of it. After all, Paul McCartney was 27 when The Beatles broke up. You've heard of The Beatles, right?

Follow the unexpected path. Because the best lived life is rarely a straight line.

Make room for new seats at the table — and seek wisdom from those who challenge you.

Above all: Trust your head. Trust your heart. Stand your ground.

Clearly, your instincts and talents have led you in the right direction thus far.

You will now lead us with that unshakeable commitment to kindness and curiosity that has shined on this campus.

And you will emerge as an unstoppable force for justice.

A force formidable enough to break down the walls of injustice — wherever they stand.

Congratulations, once again, and thank you so much for having me.

And to those of you from the great Garden State, always remember one more thing: We're from Jersey, baby!

God bless you all.

Governor Phil Murphy

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