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Professor Michael Kirsch, Diploma Ceremony Address

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University of Notre Dame The Law School

Prof. Kirsch Commencement Speech 2010

It's an honor to be permitted to address you in the final few minutes of your formal education at Notre Dame Law School.

Kirsch Prof of Year 2010 story

You've witnessed and experienced many changes since you entered the law school in August 2007—you've learned to think about the law in ways you might not have been exposed to before; you've been exposed to the way that the law impacts all members of society, both here in the US and around the world; you've learned the intricacies of the Internal Revenue Code; and outside of the classroom, you've made many new friends and had many memorable experiences.

One of the most obvious changes you've experienced during your 3 years at Notre Dame Law School is the remarkable transformation of our law school building. Perhaps more than any other Notre Dame Law School class, the Class of 2010 is associated with the physical expansion of the law school, as the building project almost exactly coincided with your law school careers. Just a few weeks before your arrival in August 2007, the first spades of dirt were turned for the new Eck Hall of Law and Commons. Midway through your time here, we were able to move into Eck Hall. And now, within a few weeks of your graduation, the final touches will be put on the renovated Biolchini Hall. I was glad to see that many of you yesterday were able to take part in a walking tour of Biolchini Hall.

But the building project doesn't just coincide chronologically with your law school careers. In many ways, the construction and renovation of the buildings closely parallels your development as law students and soon-to-be lawyers. Of course, unlike the new building, whose foundation had to be dug from scratch in the Fall of 2007 by the construction workers and their equipment, each of you arrived at Notre Dame Law School in the Fall of 2007 with strong pre-existing foundations. Those foundations had been built not only by your own previous hard work, but also by the hard work and influence of your parents, spouses, family, friends and earlier teachers.

During your 1st year, the construction workers were performing some of their most difficult work—raising the beams and erecting the frame of the new building. So too, in that 1st year you were performing some of your heaviest academic lifting, grappling as 1Ls with concepts and ways of thinking you might not previously have had to deal with. Just as it was sometimes difficult to imagine how Eck Hall would all come together from just seeing the initial beams resting in a large hole in the ground, at the time it might have been difficult for you to see how all the studying and preparing for those 1st year classes would all come together to create the framework for your legal education.

But by the time you reached your 2nd year, things began to take shape with both the new building and—I hope—your legal education. The construction workers were able to complete the structure, converting the skeletal framing of the 1st year into a beautiful new hall. Similarly, you used your 2nd & 3rd years to build upon the framework you established in the 1st year, filling in the details by focusing on areas that interested you and, I hope, for which you have a passion.

Now we've reached the end of the 3-year building construction project, and you've reached the

end of your 3 years of formal legal education. You'd think that means I'd reached the end of my building analogies, but you'd be wrong.

Having new and renovated law school buildings—as beautiful and expansive as they are—is not the measure of a law school. What makes a law school great is what goes on within the walls of those buildings: the kind of students who enter those buildings as 1Ls; the experiences and education they receive while they are within its walls; and the kind of professionals who walk out of its doors when they graduate.

Similarly, receiving a diploma from a great law school is not the measure of a person. What really matters is what you do with the education and experiences that you've received here. Even in this, you can take a lesson from one of the less enjoyable aspects of the building project. While the Biolchini Hall renovations have taken place, the entire law school community has been in Eck Hall and Commons. While the concentration of the entire community into one space had the benefit of providing many opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to interact with each other on a regular basis, it had the downside of creating periodic conflicts, and requiring tradeoffs, on space usage. As an administrator involved in some of those decisions, I know we tried to strike a balance, but certainly we weren't perfect.

In your own lives, you too will face many conflicts that require tradeoffs. Of course, the conflicts you face will often be much more significant than which group can use the Commons at which time. One of the more pressing conflicts you'll face is the demand for your time—in particular, between your professional life and your personal obligations to your family and community. Always be attuned to this and, while it's not possible to strike a perfect balance, if you have to err, err on the side of what's really most important.

Fifty years from now, I am confident that Eck Hall and Commons, and Biolchini Hall, will still be standing as the physical heart of the law school. I also am confident that—although I certainly won't be among them—the then-existing faculty will still be doing their best to educate lawyers of whom Notre Dame can be proud.

If you are able to return for your 50th reunion, I hope that you will be able to say to yourself that your receipt of your Notre Dame Law Degree way back on May 15, 2010, was only one more part of the foundation upon which you built a life in which you were able to make a difference.

A visitor to campus who happened to have visited in August 2007, and who came back this weekend, might think the most important development at the law school in the past 3 years was the building project. But those of us on the faculty know that we've been helping to build—or more accurately, facilitate the development of—something even more important.....a new class of Notre Dame lawyers.

The large majority of people that you come into contact with over the course of your life will never have the opportunity to visit our campus. Whether it's a client in your private law practice or legal aid clinic; students who you teach; members of the community who are affected by your volunteer work; or anyone else impacted by you, personally or professionally—they won't have the opportunity to see our beautiful buildings.

Instead, in their eyes, you are Notre Dame. You will be the edifice of the Notre Dame Law School that the rest of the world will see as you disperse across the country and around the globe. And that has the potential to create a much larger impact than even the most impressive

of buildings can make.

Again, on behalf of the entire faculty and staff, congratulations to all of you, and to your families and friends celebrating with you here today.

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