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Professor Anthony J. Bellia, Jr. Commencement Address

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The graduates from the class of 2003 select **Professor Anthony J. Bellia** as the 2003 “Teacher of the Year”

Professor Bellia teaches courses in contracts and federal courts. He joined the Law School faculty in the fall of 2000 as an assistant professor of law. He earned his B.A. *summa cum laude* from Canisius College in 1991, where he was named the outstanding graduate in economics and political science as well as a Harry S. Truman Scholar. At the Notre Dame Law School, he received the prestigious Judge Roger T. Kiley Fellowship and served as editor-in-chief of the *Notre Dame Law Review*. He earned his J.D. *summa cum laude* in 1994 and received the Dean Joseph O’Meara Award for outstanding academic achievement. He is admitted to practice in the state of New York and in the District of Columbia.

After graduation, Professor Bellia clerked for the Honorable William M. Skretny of the United States District Court for the Western District of New York, for the Honorable Diarmuid F. O’Sconnlain of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, and, in the October 1997 term, for Associate Justice Antonin Scalia of the United States Supreme Court. From 1998 to 2000, he practiced law as an associate with Miller, Cassidy, Larroca & Lewin in Washington, D.C.



Graduation Address by Professor Anthony J. Bellia Jr., Recipient of the 2003 Law School Distinguished Teacher Award

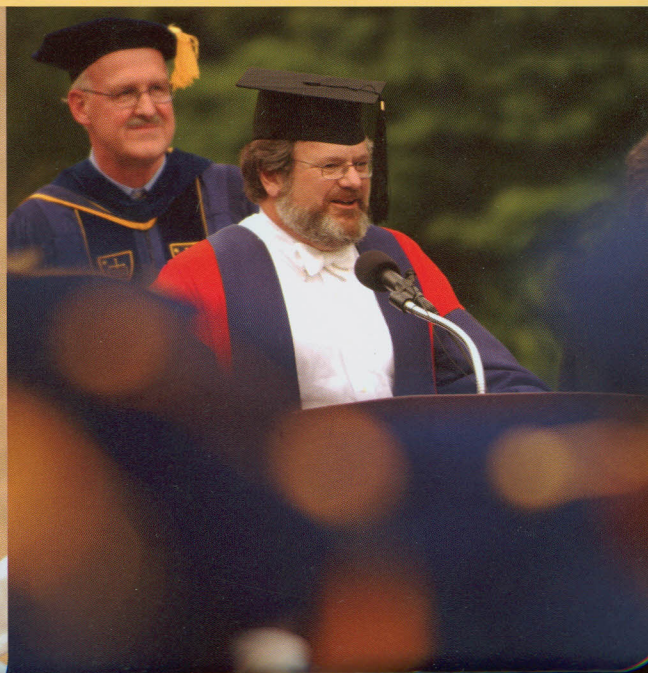
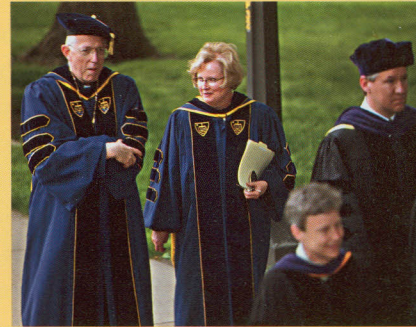
In speaking with several of you during the week preceding graduation, I was struck by a sentiment expressed by one of you in particular. One of you said that, living under the shadow of the Dome for three years, he had come to take for granted the opportunity to study law at Notre Dame, a university with which people all over the world want to be associated. And, now, having come to take Notre Dame for granted, he felt as though he were graduating without having left his mark on Notre Dame—and this was an empty feeling. “There will never be a plaque in the Law School that has my name on it,” he said. “There will never be a journal on the shelf that lists my name as an editor.... On graduation day, no one will hear my name associated with any special honors.” And so forth.

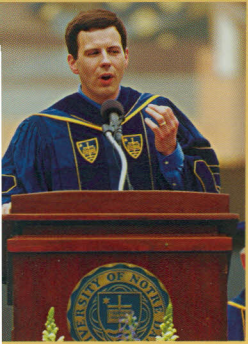
You must not, however, leave here today with the feeling that these are the kinds of things that determine whether you have left your mark on Notre Dame. Those of you who in your first year suffered the disappointment of grades that you were not accustomed to receiving, but nonetheless diligently persisted in your studies, perhaps semester after semester not receiving the grades that you expected: you, too, have left your mark on Notre Dame. You have valued learning over recognition and left a mark of

integrity on Notre Dame. Those of you who were delighted with your first-semester grades, but never rested on your laurels, semester after semester earning high grades that perhaps you no longer needed instrumentally:

you have left your mark on Notre Dame. The plaque that might bear your name in the Law School does no justice to the mark of integrity that you have left on Notre Dame. Those of you, and this would be all of you, who took exams for three years without proctors, sometimes in your homes, and who never gave in to the temptation to cheat: you have left your mark on Notre Dame. Future students of this Law School will be called upon to do the same, and the mark of integrity that you have left here will be their source of strength. Those of you who have come to the aid of those classmates and staff members who suffered personal tragedies over the last three years: you have left your mark on Notre Dame. That one does not receive a trophy for voluntarily lending a hand to a friend does not mean that one has failed to leave a mark on Notre Dame.

I must confess that when I walk through the hallways of the Law School at the end of the day, I seldom read the plaques on the wall. But, sometimes, I pop my head into a classroom late at night, when the halls are quiet, and the classroom does not feel empty; rather, it feels electric. You know the experience. The spirit of integrity that permeates the Notre Dame Law School is the mark that you have left on Notre Dame.





That said, your goal today should not be to figure out whether and how you have left your mark on Notre Dame. Ultimately, you *are* Notre Dame. Your comings and goings over the past three years have not been some sort of virtual exercise in a land of make-believe. What you do tomorrow will be as much a part of Notre Dame as what you did yesterday. When you find yourself doing thankless work for which other people receive the credit, and,

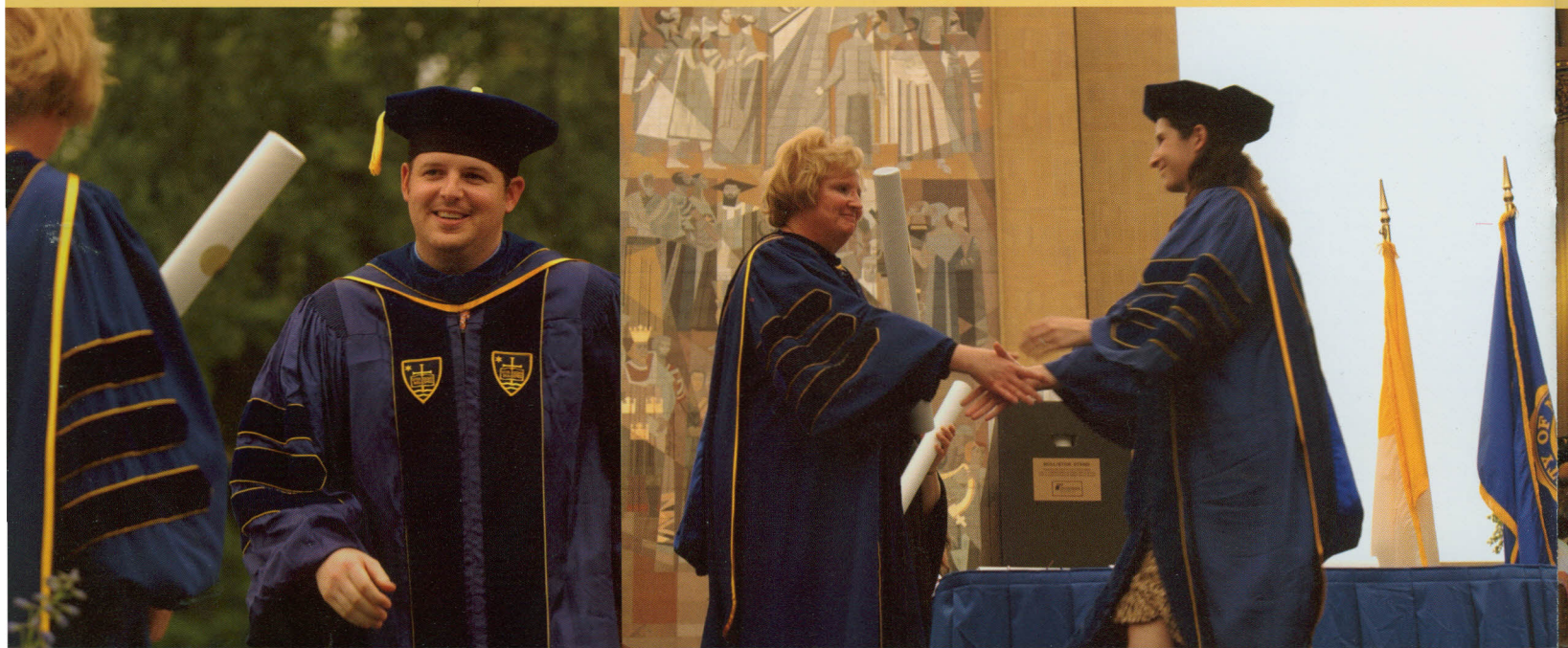
rather than seethe about it, you relish good outcomes, you remain with Notre Dame. When you find yourself in a position of power with an office full of plaques and awards, and, rather than become vain and complacent, you diligently pursue good outcomes and treat everyone in your organization, from top to bottom, with dignity and gratitude, you remain with Notre Dame. In private practice, when you find yourself short for the first time on your monthly billable hours (and this will be a great moment of choice for you), and, rather than pad your hours, you make an honest accounting of the hours you actually worked that month, you remain with Notre Dame.

And you will remain with Notre Dame in so many other ways as well. When you find yourself at 4 o'clock in the afternoon on a Little League baseball diamond with mud on your loafers and knots in your stomach because you know that you are going to be up all night writing a brief, you remain with Notre Dame. When you find yourself day-to-day addressing issues of great importance—international affairs, multi-billion dollar deals—but you take half an hour to stop by the house of a parent, a grandparent, or an aunt or uncle to change a water jug and thereby address perhaps the issue of

greatest importance in that person's day, you remain with Notre Dame. And when you find yourself at some point, by chance or by choice, on your own, and you actively pursue the challenging and selfless vocation that your circumstances have enabled you to pursue—may God bless you—you remain with Notre Dame.

Remaining with Notre Dame means pursuing not recognition but influence in the achievement of good. Your goal should not be to be the best lawyer, for if that is your goal, surely you will fail. There always will be someone who is regarded as a better lawyer than you are, and there always will be someone who is regarded as a worse lawyer than you are. Strive for influence in the achievement of good, and recognition either will follow or be irrelevant. This applies if you are working on Wall Street or in legal aid. Those of you who will work 2500 hours next year in the private sector with honesty and integrity will be performing work that is necessary and beneficial to both your clients and your community. Legal tasks that demand around-the-clock attention are not new in history. And money has not been, and is not now, the reward for performing them. If you take it upon yourself to perform these tasks honestly and justly, you will remain with Notre Dame. Those of you who will work next year not for profit but on behalf of those who have not the means to afford for-profit legal services also will be performing work that is necessary and beneficial to your clients and your community. The poor always have been and always will be with us. If you take it upon yourself to perform these tasks with honesty and integrity, accepting the attendant financial sacrifice that you and your family will endure, you will remain with Notre Dame.

While I ask you not to focus on being the best lawyer, there are certain roles in life at which I would ask you to focus on being the best. You have been a child to a parent. If you are not the best



child to that parent, there is no one who will be better. You may be a sibling to a brother or a sister. If you are not the best sibling to that brother or sister, there is no one who will be better. If you marry, and you are not the best spouse to your husband or wife, there is no one who will be better. And if you have children, and you are not the best father or mother to that child, there is no one who will be better.

Simply put, pursuing the achievement of good demands self-denial. That is the principle upon which the Congregation of the Holy Cross founded this University. The mural that stands behind me is not about a touchdown; it is about the fact that self-denial and suffering are the wellspring of good. The same is true of Our Lady on the Dome. Why did the Congregation of the Holy Cross choose her as our patron? Because self-denial is the wellspring of good.

So do not think today that you somehow must leave your mark on Notre Dame before you leave. When you go, Notre Dame goes with you. It is often said there will come a day when the stadium no longer will stand, the Hesburgh Library will have crumbled, and the Dome no longer will shine over a campus; but Notre Dame will endure because you are Notre Dame. We need not project that far into the future, however, to appreciate this reality. In fact, we must appreciate it today, because tomorrow these symbols will not be present in your day-to-day lives. Do those of you who were in my first-year contracts section remember the first day of law school? On that day, I told you that you are here because you had exhibited good judgment and good character in your prior endeavors, the *sine qua non* for admission to Notre Dame. And I asked you not to leave your character and judgment at the door as you entered law school. You must not lose that character, I said. You

must foster it. Why such a solemn charge on the first day of law school? In short, because today would be a sad day, rather than the joyful day that it is, if it turned out that you were more a part of Notre Dame when you entered its law school than you are as you leave it today. When you get in your cars this week and take to the interstates, and the Dome grows smaller and smaller in the rear-view mirror, let it grow bigger and bigger in your hearts. You will be as much with Notre Dame where you are as you are here now. When you exercise good judgment and character in your moments of choice, you much more define what Notre Dame is than do a bunch of crazies doing push-ups in a stadium. If Notre Dame does not inhere in the post-graduate lives of its alumni, it cannot be said that it inheres in the lives of its students.

If the day ever comes that you feel disconnected from Notre Dame, or if the joy of this day ever becomes a distant and seemingly unreal memory, then, by all means, call, write, or, better still, grab a big cup of coffee, get in your car, and set the compass for the plains of northern Indiana. Notre Dame cannot afford to lose even one of you, and you cannot afford to lose Notre Dame.

Congratulations and may God bless you all.

