

5-19-2000

Associate Dean Vincent D. Rougeau, Diploma Ceremony Address

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Recommended Citation

Rougeau, Vincent D., "Associate Dean Vincent D. Rougeau, Diploma Ceremony Address" (2000). *Commencement Programs*. Paper 10.
http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/commencement_programs/10

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Graduation Address

BY ASSOCIATE DEAN VINCENT D. ROUGEAU

RECIPIENT OF THE 2000 LAW SCHOOL DISTINGUISHED TEACHING AWARD

Well, we made it — you all graduated and I survived my first year of being associate dean! I can't tell you how honored I am to have been selected by you as faculty member of the year. As my "first" Notre Dame class, you were already destined to be fondly remembered. Now I know I will never forget you. Thank you so very much for this special award.

I have to take a moment to recognize those of you who were my first-year Contracts students, the year I was here as a visiting professor. You were a wonderful group, and I had a great time teaching you. Thank you for helping to make that year so successful.

The one event from that first-year Contracts class that really sticks in my mind is the time I ended class early because three or four people were unprepared. Now, I think my students and my colleagues would agree that I am a mild-mannered kind of guy, but there comes a time during the second semester here at Notre Dame, when winter is ending in most places but South Bend remains locked in chilly darkness under the "perma-cloud," and we all would really rather be somewhere that had at least a passing acquaintance with the sun. The first-year students are working on their moot-court briefs, class participation suffers, and the faculty tends to get a little testy. Well, one day during this time I called on several people to discuss a case and no one I called on was prepared for Contracts class, so I said, "You know, let's just end class today. I mean, why should I struggle?" So, I ended class.

Well, the students felt bad — "This is so out of character. Perhaps Rougeau is really losing it this time." — and several of them e-mailed me to apologize. Then I felt bad because I wasn't really angry, I was just suffering from the effects of the perma-cloud like everyone else. By the next class, everything was back to normal and I basically forgot about the whole thing. Well, several weeks later, I found myself at a party in Chicago, chatting with someone I didn't know, as one tends to do at parties, and I told this person what I do. Suddenly, he said, "Wait a minute, I've heard of you! My cousin's fiancé's sister's best friend goes to Notre Dame and she told us about you. You're the professor that stormed out of class! Wow! You really crack the whip!"

Then, my wife looked at me, shocked, and said, "Honey, you stormed out of class. . . . You should try to relax! It's probably all that caffeine you drink."

I would like to take this opportunity to ask, "What did you guys tell people?!" Now, I have this new reputation: Rougeau the Enforcer; Rougeau the Hammer!

You know, I love what I do, and I feel particularly blessed to be able to say that. It certainly hasn't always been true in my own life, and many people never get to experience the feeling of loving what they do for a living. So, the first piece of advice I'd like to give all of you is to listen to your hearts and do what you really want to do with your law degree. It's very hard to be successful at something when you are wishing you were doing something else.

I say I love what I do, but "love" is a complicated word. We use it to mean so many different things. But it is an important word, and

perhaps we don't always treat it with the respect it deserves. When I think about my own work and how I do it, I try to keep focused on the Christian concept of love — loving God and loving others as I love myself. The reason I teach, and the reason I find a great deal of satisfaction in the often very difficult job of associate dean, is that I find the personal engagement with you, my students, and the slice of humanity that you represent, truly inspiring. It's through the rough-and-tumble of human interaction that we learn how to see God in others and how we gain a better understanding of the tremendous gift of God's love for us.

This is not to say that these interactions are always easy or pleasant. There are moments in my office, perhaps after a particularly difficult conversation with a student or a colleague, when I want to flee to a place where I can be completely free of human contact. Oftentimes it seems that it is our interaction with other people that makes our lives messy and difficult. If we look closely at some current trends in American society, for instance, we can see a growing tendency for people to disengage from others, to find ways to limit human contact or make the contact as selective as possible. We often hear that one of the great "benefits" of technology is that it frees us from the time-consuming and inefficient practice of talking to other human beings. It's so much easier, so much cleaner, to simply "point and click."

I think that one of the great strengths of the Notre Dame Law School is that we have resisted the temptation to disengage from one another and to pursue our educations and careers as isolated individuals primarily focused on personal achievement. We work hard at trying to maintain the values of a Christian community, and we constantly struggle with the tough work of treating one another with dignity and respect. Do we fall short? Yes, we often do. We bicker, we mistrust, we accuse, perhaps we even hate from time to time. But those feelings are all part of the struggle to love. What brought me to Notre Dame, and what keeps me here, is the opportunity to work with people — students, faculty, administrators and staff — who want to be part of an institution where faith matters; where they matter; and where there is love.

Members of the NDLS Class of 2000, my fervent wish for all of you is that you resist the temptation to cut yourself off from others and that you will constantly seek God in those around you. Certainly in your family and friends, but also in your colleagues at work, in the people who clean your office, and always in the poor and dispossessed. Try to resist the call of a culture that tends to promote personal desires over community needs and individual accomplishment over human engagement. In short, love as you are loved.

Thank you, Class of 2000, for this wonderful gift you have given me and for all that you have taught me. I will cherish the memory of your three years here and I hope our paths will cross many times in the years to come. I wish you success. But most of all, I wish you the peace and happiness that comes with love.

I love you, Class of 2000. God bless you! Now go out and make us proud!

