

Good morning , UMSL Class of 2021! I am so honored to be here with you to celebrate this momentous occasion. And I am very grateful that Dean Kersten invited me to speak to your class in particular. As I thought about you when I was preparing to talk to you today, I could not help but think that each and every one of you has shown a level of resilience, strength and drive that surpasses many of the classes that have come before you. The many and significant changes brought on by the pandemic have put you to the test in ways we could never have imagined, and your presence here today demonstrates that you stepped up to meet these challenges over the course of nearly half of your college career to successfully complete your degree. You are amazing, and you make me UMSL Proud.

I would also like to recognize your family members, friends, professors, staff and members of the administration who supported each of you in so many different ways – whether by providing financial support, imparting invaluable knowledge to help you remain on a path to success, being your cheerleader when things got tough, bringing you a snack when your were buried in your books getting ready to take your finals or finish a research project, or simply being there to listen and lean on when you needed them. As they are here to celebrate you, we also celebrate these very important people who have impacted your lives.

I would be remiss if I did not take a few minutes to talk about UMSL and the UMSL community – some things I really did not understand or fully appreciate when I graduated in 1991.

First, I have learned that UMSL prepared me well to successfully compete with anyone from any other university in the country. As I started my law school career at Washington University, I was surrounded by graduates of institutions like Yale, Princeton, Duke, and many other prestigious schools. And I remember well feeling extremely intimidated and very unsure of whether I would be able to compete. In hindsight, I need not have spent so much time worrying about this – my professors her at UMSL were outstanding, the courses were academically excellent, and this university positioned me to excel in highly competitive environments – both academic and in my career. So, as you leave here today, do so knowing that you, too, are prepared to succeed, no matter the competition.

Second, I learned that the faculty at UMSL, and the level of dedication to students, is exceptional. One professor who profoundly impacted my life was John Works. He was an Associate Professor of African History. Professor Works shared his passion for African history in a way that was contagious, and he nurtured my interest in the subject beyond the classroom, inviting me and my husband, Thomas, to his home to see his art collection – which was breathtaking. He let me touch his artifacts, and he shared how he came upon them. He also encouraged me to push myself and to have confidence to pursue a career in the law. Regrettably, last year when I went online to find him so that I could thank him again for all he did, I learned that he had passed away literally the week before. I tell you this so that you do not miss the opportunity to reach back in time to express your gratitude to those people who have touched your lives in a special way. There is no day like today.

Finally, I have learned how incredible the UMSL community is, including students, alumni, faculty, staff and the administration. I would not know this had I not – purely by chance – stumbled upon the Alumni Association website at a time the association was seeking candidates to serve on the Governing Board. By getting engaged, I have had the chance to meet true leaders – in education, business, non-profits, and science. All of us alumni have come back to actively serve and support UMSL because UMSL really did transform our lives – we are living proof, just as you are – that those words “UMSL Transforms Lives” are not just an empty slogan. Today, you join a network of more than 77,000 alumni right here in the St. Louis Region – this is an invaluable resource filled with fellow Tritons who want to help you succeed in any way they can.

Finally, I want to share a story that, in many ways represents my life as a whole. As you begin your own journey, I hope you will remember this tidbit when you face obstacles, or life gets tough. When I was around seven, my friend and her mother took me to the zoo. At the time, the elephants and hippos and other very large animals lived in the Elephant House. I was so excited to see these giant animals I could barely contain myself. When we got to the hippos, there was one very close up, so I stepped up on the bannister to get as close as I could. No sooner did I do that than the hippo began to turn around and pee all over me. I was soaked from head to foot. I was shocked and crying. As I breathlessly bawled, my friend’s mom looked at me sympathetically, and gently asked of I

wanted to go home. Crying so hard I could barely get the words out, I cried, "No... I want to see all the other animals." And so we went on, and I dried out as we walked around. It was a glorious day.

So, when you don't get the job you want, or the promotion you deserve, or the award you earned, or when someone else takes credit for your work, or any number of difficult situations arise, remember this story.

As Barak Obama has said, "The future rewards those who press on. I don't have time to feel sorry for myself. I don't have time to complain. I'm going to press on." And as Dory said, "Keep on swimming." I wish all of you an amazing life – one during which you just don't let a hippo rain on your parade.

Thank you