

Commencement Remarks

January 19, 2002

Speech Excerpts by Thomas E. Brennan

In the spring of 1950, I was a 20-year-old law school freshman, working at the Detroit Bar Association law library for 50 cents an hour.

The librarian, Helen Snook, a frail woman with gray hair and matching complexion, sent me on an errand to deliver some books to an attorney named George Cassidy. She explained to me that Cassidy had worked for her in the library some years before, and that he had gone on to become a very successful lawyer.

His law firm was located on a high floor of the old Dime Building in downtown Detroit. When I arrived, he invited me into his private office and had me take a seat at this huge mahogany desk across from where he was ensconced in a massive leather chair.

After a few pleasantries, he opened a desk drawer, pulled out a copy of his income tax return, shoved it across the desk and told me to look at the number next to “adjusted gross income.” It was something over \$42,000. That would be the equivalent of about half a million dollars today. Needless to say, I was impressed. Maybe awestruck is more like it.

Cassidy was in an expansive mood. He launched into his life story, which began much like my own; a large, working class, Irish family from the west side of Detroit; a series of menial part-time jobs to earn his way through college; and ultimately, a law degree from the University of Detroit, making him the first college graduate and the first lawyer in his family.

Once he had set the stage by showing how much we were

alike, he leaned forward with an air of confidentiality and proffered the sage advice that he had gleaned from his own successful career. Let me pass along to you the wisdom of Mr. George Cassidy as David Letterman might do it.



President and Dean Don LeDuc and Cooley founder Thomas E. Brennan enjoy the commencement ceremony of the Thomas Johnson Class

Here are the 10 top things you need to do to become successful in the practice of law:

Number ten: Get a job in a big firm in a tall building downtown.

Number nine: Write an article about some specialized area of the law. That's how you make people think you're an expert.

Number eight: As soon as you can, buy a house in Grosse Pointe or Bloomfield Hills. The most important thing about a house is the address.

Number seven: Join a country club as soon as you can. That's where the money is. If you want to get measles, you have to hang around with people who have measles.

Number six: Never drink before 5 o'clock.

Number five: Never refer to another lawyer as a guy. Always call them fellows or chaps.

Number four: Don't get married until you're at least 35 years old. A wife and children are luxuries you can't afford until you're well-established in your practice.

Number three: Don't marry one of the secretaries from the office. The partners' wives will never accept her as an equal, and that will keep you from making partner.

Number two: Never go to bar association meetings. Talking to other lawyers is a waste of time.

And the number one piece of advice from Mr. George Cassidy on how to become a successful attorney and counselor of law is: Never, never, never, under any circumstances have anything whatsoever to do with politics.

I'm not particularly good at taking advice. I married a school teacher. That's about the only thing I ever did that George Cassidy would have approved of.

By the time I was 30 years old, I was living in an old house on the west side of Detroit with my wife and five kids. I had a general law practice in a small firm, and I had run unsuccessfully for public office five times. Yes, and I used to have the occasional martini at lunch — with some of the guys in the Bar Association — but George was right about one thing: I wasn't making a whole lot of money.

It's true. I don't take advice very well. For instance, I told my dear wife, Polly, who incidentally is my best adviser and my severest critic, what I was thinking about using as the subject of my commencement speech to you graduates here this afternoon. She didn't like the idea. “Don't do it,” she said. I told my daughters, Marybeth, Ellen, and Peggy. “Don't do it,” they said. I told my secretary. She said, “Don't do it.”

So guess what? I'm gonna do it. I'm going to talk about something that you have been thinking about, worrying about, dreaming about, scheming about, fretting over, and not getting over most of your adult lives.

It's a subject that will occupy your attention for the rest of your time on this earth, as it occupies the attention of almost everyone around you — and yet it is a subject that neither you nor they want to talk about. It's the elephant in the room that everyone pretends not to notice. Ladies and gentlemen of the Thomas Johnson Class, I want to talk to you today about money.

I want to talk to you about money ... because everything you do from this day forward will affect and be affected by money; yours or somebody else's.

Every place you go, every room you enter, every meeting you attend, every deposition you take, every courtroom in which you practice your profession will have the elephant right there in the middle of it. Big as life. Not unseen, not unnoticed. But never mentioned. Never talked about. Never acknowledged.

I know. I know. I ought to be using this podium to make a touching farewell address. After all, I am graduating just as you are. We are all leaving these hallowed halls today, and there is much that could be said about the memories we

share and the difference we have made in each others' lives. But I'm reminded of the tale of the two Native Americans who emerged from a densely wooded forest, and stood at the edge of a grassy plain. One was a grizzled chieftan of

many years. Long of tooth. The other was a vigorous young brave, making his first big trip from his native village.

As they stood there gazing across the valley, the young brave could see a mountain far off in the distance. He could see the green foothills, the stately evergreens rising above them, and the glistening snow crowning the majestic peaks.

The old chief, whose squinted eyes were wearied with a thousand strainings, could barely sense the outline of the mountain rising on the distant horizon. He could not see the green foothills or the stately evergreens or the glistening snow. But he knew they were there.

He also knew of the deadly cougar and the poisonous mountain laurel, and the places

where the rocks were loose overhead and the places where the waters toppled over the edge and crashed into the swirling foam far below — and the young brave beat his fists upon his mighty chest and shouted: “I shall run across the valley and up the green foothills. I shall scale the stately evergreens and plant my feet upon the glistening snow. I shall stand upon the top of yonder mountain and shout my name to the four winds, and I shall hold the very clouds of the sky in my hands.”

And the old chief shook his head and sat down upon a log and said, “I'll wait here. My feet are killing me.”

So if my view of the future is somewhat less high-spirited and adventurous than yours, I hope you'll understand. These old feet have been blistered a few times along the way.

But not for a moment would I take away or dampen the excitement, the satisfaction, and the sense of accomplishment you are relishing here today. You've earned it.

You're entitled to be proud. You're entitled to our congratulations. But if you've sacrificed much in terms of hard work and dedication, you have also invested a huge sum of money in your legal education.

And you made a good choice. The statistics tell us that the average lawyer makes a little less than twice as much as the average college graduate earns. We also know that a lawyer's productive career is typically something around 40 years. Even without inflation, your \$84,000 investment will return approximately \$2 million by the time you're my age. You made a good investment, and it was comparatively easy



The Hon. Thomas E. Brennan

to do. The financial aid office was there. You filled out the forms. You got your money. From now on it won't be so easy.

In less than six weeks, most of you will be taking a bar examination either here in Michigan or someplace closer to home. Many of you are wondering whether you can afford to take a bar review course. Ladies and gentlemen, I'm here to tell you that you can't afford not to take a bar review course. Paying for a bar review course is not going to be the biggest challenge you'll face in the next several years. The economy is soft. The economy is flat. That's what the talking heads are saying on television. The fact is that the United States and the whole world are in a recession.

It sort of reminds me of the early 1950s when I graduated from law school. My first job in the law was with a collection firm. My salary was \$275 a month. My secretary made more than I did. Polly had to go to work. She took a job as a substitute teacher in the Detroit public schools. She brought home over \$400 a month.

After a year, I went out on my own. The first month, I made \$900. I thought I had won the lottery. The next month I took in \$276. My overhead was \$250. But practicing law alone or with a small group of close associates offers professional rewards that can't be found in the corporate world or the world of mega-sized law firms. Your relationship with clients is one on one. The decision-making is all yours. You control the ethics. You control the business judgments. You take the cases you want to take. You handle them as you think they should be handled.

You can take pride in your successes, and you quickly learn to take responsibility for your losses. But through it all, you come to know and appreciate that the practice of law is not a job. It is not a mere money-getting trade. You put in long hours because your duty to your clients demands it. You get up and go to the office in the morning because you want to be there. Because you love to be there. Because the things you are doing matter. Because you are making a difference in the lives of the people you represent.

Certainly the law is your career, your vocation, your occupation. Certainly it's the way you will bring home the bacon to support yourself and your family. But the financial rewards, which will surely be adequate, are not going to be your primary focus. You will know the elephant is there. But you will not worship the elephant. You will not let him distract you from the sweet burdens of your

professional calling.

The mural on the side of this building quotes our famous patron Thomas M. Cooley, who told us that law students should never forget that they are preparing themselves to be ministers of justice. That high purpose has been the constant focus of your faculty over these last three years.

If you are true to that goal, you will be a success.

For myself, I have seen all the evidence I need. Especially in these last months, as I have been getting closer and closer to this day of my retirement, I've had the incredible heady pleasure of receiving dozens and dozens of personal communications from students and graduates who just want me to know how much they appreciate the opportunity to study the law at Thomas Cooley Law School. They stop by my office.

They call on the phone. They drop me a note or an e-mail. "Thank you, Judge Brennan." "Thank you for giving me the chance." "Law school has changed my life."

The other day at breakfast, an alumnus who graduated in 1985, looked me squarely in the eye and said, "It was the best thing I ever did."

That sort of thing happens to me all the time. In a theater in New York. In an airport in New Jersey. In a restaurant in Florida. Cooley graduates. Cooley alumni. Lawyers. Happy with their lives. Excited about their profession. Proud of what they do for a living. Proud of what they do for their communities. Proud of what they have made of themselves.

In the last 30 years we've built a great institution here in downtown Lansing. We've brought hundreds of millions of dollars into this city. Thousands of people have moved here from all around the country. Many have stayed. We've built magnificent buildings. We have made a difference by any standard or measurement.

But the real accomplishment of my life here, the thing that gives me the most pride and satisfaction is the difference we have made in the lives of people. To help someone reach their potential, to see them grow and mature and blossom into the kind of person they want to be, the kind of person they always hoped to be, that is the real rush.

And that my friends is what I'll miss the most. The handshakes. The hugs. The thank yous. The smiles and the tears. For this day and for all the proud days of the last 30 years, you have my undying gratitude.

I love you all. Good-bye and good luck.



Phyllis Groenewoud and Lawrence Schneider, both of the 1977 Christiancy Class

Speech Excerpts

January 19, 2002
President Don LeDuc

Graduation is a special day. It always is, particularly for the families and friends of the graduates. It signals both an end and a beginning. The end of the arduous years of study except, of course, for the bar examination; the beginning of a new life as a lawyer.

It also represents the end of an equally burdensome time for those who have spent the last three or so years around those who graduate today — paying the bills, listening to the complaints and the gossip, enduring the arguments of fledgling lawyers, braving the recitation of legalisms and enthusiasms which law students exude, and living with the highs and lows, the ups and downs, and the anxieties and exultations that law school brings. So, on behalf of the graduates of the Thomas Johnson Class, I offer their thanks to all of you who have gone through law school vicariously and helped these students realize their dream.

Today is also special for seven returning members of the Christiancy Class, whose members walked across this stage 25 years ago to receive their diplomas and, like the Johnson Class members, ended one journey to begin another. These folks joined a growing number of hopefuls who took a chance on a small unaccredited school in Lansing, Michigan. None of us knew then what Cooley would become. We honor them today for having ended their journey as law students 25 years ago today, and for their accomplishments.

Today is particularly special, because it marks another end and beginning. Cooley's president and founder ends his nearly 30-year adventure as the leader of the Thomas M. Cooley Law School and begins a new life.

Cooley was baked from scratch without a recipe. It evolved from the mind of one remarkable person. It was founded with virtually no funds; it possessed no physical plant; and it succeeded because of the boundless inventiveness, undaunted optimism and enthusiasm, and iron will of one man.

Thanks to Tom Brennan, Cooley today is an enterprise with 250 employees, a multimillion dollar budget, and three magnificent buildings. With the graduation of the Johnson Class, Cooley Law School now has over 9,000 graduates. With another 1,800 students currently enrolled, we will have 10,000 graduates by the time the last of the current classes graduates. We are now the second-largest American law school in both enrollment and physical plant size.

Without Tom Brennan, 10,000 dreamers would not be lawyers, and the 250 of us who work at Cooley would not have great jobs.

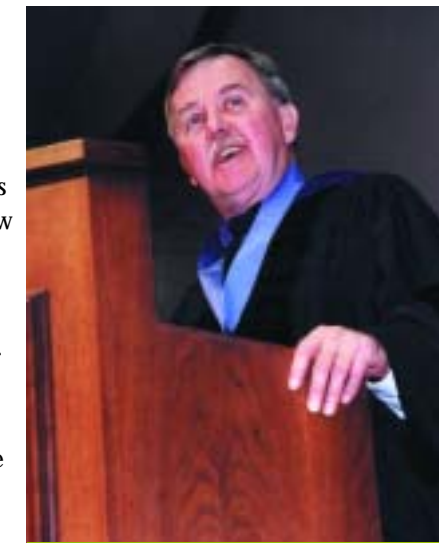
Most people in this room will not know or recall that Tom Brennan is making his second appearance as the speaker at a Cooley commencement. For me, the remarks he addressed to the Fletcher Class, which graduated in September, 1976, were the best I ever

heard, here or anywhere. The Fetters were never actually a class until the day they graduated, being made up of a handful of stragglers from earlier classes and accelerators from later classes in the gap created when Cooley went from a traditional semester format to the year-round program and began to admit three classes per year.

That change itself was one of the first and greatest innovations of Tom Brennan at Cooley Law School. So, rather than have these students wait until the next regular graduation, we had a ceremony for the 12 of them.

And rather than have an outside speaker or deliver his own remarks, Tom did something novel, clever, and appropriate — he read the section from each graduate's law school application where the applicant described why he or she wanted to be a lawyer. By that simple device, he reminded them, and all of the faculty, staff, family, and friends in attendance, of what the law means. While the graduates came to graduation thinking of the mundane issues of big debts and new jobs, Tom reminded them that they came to law school because they wanted to serve the law, to work with people, to safeguard human rights, to protect liberty, and to help others confront the problems they face. This device changed the focus from the material and self-indulgent concerns of earning a living to the majesty of the law and the value of lawyers in making America the beacon of freedom, democracy, liberty, and hope that it remains today.

I offer from all of us the wish expressed by our Assistant Vice President of Finance, Kathy Neros: May the years ahead be spent in the company of loving family and good friends as you reminisce about the thousands of lives that you have touched as the founder and president of Thomas M. Cooley Law School.



President and Dean Don LeDuc