

## **RWU Law Commencement 2009 Valedictory Speech: Jessica Sanford**

I have made friendships with a wonderful group of people that I admire and respect. I have been challenged by some of the most talented, remarkable professors that any law school could hope to have on staff. As it is for each of us, law school was a routine of briefing cases, writing papers, studying for exams, and wishing at the very least indigestion on Socrates for having invented his method of teaching.

But my life before law school was very different. 5 years ago, I was a waitress. I hated it. I worked at a seafood restaurant on Cape Cod, and the chef had an anger management problem and didn't handle stress well. I spent most nights hoping things would go smoothly so he would not start screaming at the waitstaff.

At the time, I was also trying to finish an undergraduate degree I had started 13 years before. It took 13 years, and I went through 5 different colleges before I got my bachelor's degree. I started right after high school, but I dropped out after having a child, and the next decade was an on-and-off effort at finishing, through a marriage, another child, a divorce, and a marriage. I was pretty sure that I would not look all that compelling to a law school. Yet Roger Williams was willing to take a chance on me, and let me come here.

I know some of you were superstars before you came here; you did really well in school and did all the right things, and you came here to Roger Williams all put together. But I bet a lot of you feel the way I do – that the school took a risk in accepting you.

But regardless how we came here, whether we came as a risk or as a sure thing, we all took a risk in accepting Roger Williams. The school is the number one school in Rhode Island, but it is surrounded in Massachusetts and Connecticut by more established and higher ranked schools.

But we thought the school was worth the risk, and the school thought we were worth the risk. We were all right.

The school did for me an amazing thing. It gave me a chance – the chance to redefine my career and remake my life to be what I had always hoped it could be.

Taking the school up on that chance involved an incredible amount of work, and it was scary at times – like the rest of Section A, I spent my first semester in civil procedure with white knuckles, and it did not get any easier when Professor Ritchie took over for torts second semester. It took a lot of work from family – I'm probably not the only one who needed to delegate the shopping and cooking and cleaning and even parenting to family members. My husband worked really hard to get me through law school. My kids listened to me talking constantly about legal issues – I don't know too many 9 year olds who know the difference between a tort and a crime, but mine does. And I don't know of a teenager who would want to sit through a contracts class because I have school and he doesn't. But mine did.

Some of this experience was exactly as I expected – the hard classes, the inordinate amount of work, the worry, the near-constant stress, But some of it I did not expect.

I did not expect to find professors so engaged and invested in our success. I did not expect to find students so supportive and collegial: this is the most supportive group of type A personalities with control issues that I have ever known. Our success has been a group effort. I was surprised by that, and I am grateful for it. I am grateful that Roger Williams provided us with an atmosphere of support that permeated everything and everyone here.

I am grateful because I know there is at least one professor here, as Section A knows, who thinks we will be running the state in a few years. Let's not disappoint him. Let's not disappoint everyone at this school who invested so much time and energy in our success. Let's keep taking chances, and let's make the most of the opportunity the school has given us to change the course of our lives. Good luck, everyone.