



*Remarks by*  
**U.S. Representative Diana DeGette**  
**2011 Denver Law Commencement Speaker**

Good Morning Law School Graduates - and  
Congratulations!

I am so proud of all the hard work that has brought you to this day. And congratulations to your families and all those here this morning who sweated through contracts, torts and moot court right by your sides. And all your hard work has finally brought you here – standing on the cusp of a life practicing the law.

I have sat where you sit, so it is a particular honor to stand before you today as you begin this most noble profession.

29 years ago, on a similar May morning, I stood in front of my own law school graduating class from NYU Law School as the student speaker, and said something really radical for the time – “I don’t have a job.” Looking out over the audience, I saw most of them (at least the parents) gasp.

I know that statement doesn’t sound so radical now in 2011, when nationwide 45% of graduates have not yet secured a job. But at that time, all but a handful of law school graduates already had secured their jobs at law firms, competitive clerkships, or other highly-coveted employment.

But here’s why my statement was radical for that time—I was looking for a job in public interest law. And then, as now, the fewest number of jobs available for new lawyers were in public interest law. The reason my statement was radical then—and even now—is that our beloved profession still values some areas of the law less than those with a real public need. And even individuals with a strong commitment and interest to those fields cannot find employment because there are simply not enough jobs. And I would posit an equally radical notion today, almost 30 years later:

The fact that there are so few traditional jobs for graduating law students, while admittedly a challenge, is also the opportunity of a generation to show society what we are really about as lawyers.

I want to congratulate those today who, as my father used to say, will be working in your field. I want to assure the rest of you that you will find a position that, even if not the dream first job, will with perseverance and hard work lead to a marvelous career. But I want to challenge the entire class of 2011 to think broadly of how you can use this law degree earned with your intellect and the sweat of your brows for the greater good.

The economic crisis of the past few years has left many industries devastated, and just now beginning to recover – and I know I don't have to tell any of you – the legal profession has been particularly hard hit.

Many of you likely came to law school, with a passion for justice, and a confidence that pursuing justice as a career could also bring professional and financial security.

But in today's economic climate, many of you sitting out there may still face an uphill battle to find the employment your degree should afford you – one that pays the bills while satisfying the mission that led you to the law in the first place.

You may sit here this morning struggling with the heavy burden of 70, 80, or even 90 thousand dollars in student loans, worried how you will ever pay them off, when the job you always envisioned hasn't materialized. The loan burden for any law school graduate is overwhelming, and that is why, by the way, many of us in Congress have been trying to reduce that load through loan forgiveness and other programs.

But as I did that morning in Carnegie Hall all those years ago, if you have not yet found employment, I urge you this morning to embrace the statement, "I don't have a job."

Why? Because YOU not having a job right now...

YOU - with your skills, your passion, and this prestigious degree...

YOU have the potential to be an invaluable asset to the people of this city, this state and this nation – while at the same time, beginning a long and successful career.

Many of you came to law school with a career path paved in your mind – path which thousands of attorneys have walked before you...

You graduate from law school with marketable skills and a prestigious degree; maybe you clerk and then you get a job at a law firm, where you work with steady and secure employment for several years as an associate; until one day down the road, you hopefully make partner.

It is a formula for a successful career – and one which will afford you the ability to make a real difference in the world, as I will discuss in a minute. The fundamental characteristic of that formula is employment security –

But that is a security that seems elusive today for all lawyers.

In the book "To Kill a Mockingbird," Atticus Finch, perhaps one of the greatest fictional legal characters of all time, reminds us that:

"There is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution... is a court."

All of you sitting here today likely came to the law because of that power... That great equalizing power

– and everyone sitting here today has the opportunity to figure out his or her own path to becoming part of that great equalizer.

You, as the lawyers for a new millennium, have an opportunity to break out of that old formula, to find new paths for yourselves that may yield even greater rewards.

Many of you may have chosen to come to DU in order to ultimately practice law in the mile-high city; but now find fulfilling that goal difficult.

And if not Denver, you may be looking in other major cities – Los Angeles, San Francisco, St. Louis, Chicago, or Dallas...

But again today you may be finding more challenges than job offers.

But before you throw your hands up in frustration, stop.

Take a look at what opportunities await you if you step off that traditional path.

What if – rather than the excitement – but great uncertainty – of a major city, you considered a small city, small town, or even a rural community where you could actually and almost immediately begin practicing law.

The American Bar Association has long lamented the critical shortage of attorneys in less-populated areas.

In fact, one of their recent studies showed that only 20% of lawyers in the US practice in communities with populations of less than 50,000 people.

But for you, that number represents an opportunity.

An opportunity to go someplace you may have never thought of, to gain professional experience and security you couldn't have imagined.

So take a second right now to imagine this:

Rather than staying in Denver, hoping for a job at a big firm, as you try and start your life as a lawyer without your dream job...

Rather than living with that uncertainty...

Why not head West on I-70... and instead find a job with as an associate to an older lawyer or a city government in Wolcott... or Glenwood Springs... or Rifle... or any of the tiny communities in between, or the small towns all across our beloved Western landscape.

Small towns where parents and children need talented attorneys to help them with family law matters like divorce, custody, child support and wills.

Or where people are desperate for lawyers to help them keep their homes or simply to navigate the morass of the housing crisis that's affected them and their neighbors.

As a lawyer in a small town – even at this nascent stage of your career– you'd likely find yourself in a courtroom, arguing cases and gaining the kind of experience in only a few months, many associates in big firms must wait years for.

The people in those towns could use your skills, your education, and your passion... and YOU could use a job that lays the foundation for a long and successful career, while paying the bills and getting your life underway.

In exploring a smaller locale or a different specialty than you had planned, you would be filling a great need for those communities, and for yourself.

But let me take a moment and go back to that radical statement I made back in 1982 – to encourage you to pursue yet another opportunity...

An opportunity for the world to benefit from your abilities; and an opportunity for you to find the most rewarding work you'll ever do –

Working in the public interest.

The Legal Services Corporation, in quantifying the “justice gap” in America, found that only ONE legal-aid attorney is available for every 6,415 low-income individuals.

And for every person lucky enough to actually be assisted by legal aid, there is another that must be turned away.

For many of us, we may only have need for legal representation a handful of times in our lives.

But for Americans living below the poverty level, they have, on average, reason for legal representation at least once EVERY, SINGLE, YEAR – ·

It's true that there aren't many jobs with Legal Services Corporation, or the Public Defender's Office or the ACLU. But they all need help.

Consider the case of Bill Martinez. Bill Martinez was a young lawyer in Chicago when he decided some years ago to move his family to Denver. Bill didn't have a job, and wanted something in public service. So he called the Legal Services office. They didn't have a job open, but he volunteered his services for free. He worked as a volunteer lawyer for four months and was ultimately hired on. I just saw Bill yesterday at his swearing-in as Colorado's newest Federal District Judge.

At Judge Martinez's investiture, I got to talking to several other judges who all told me that they have had volunteer clerks over the past few years, and all of those clerks have good jobs today, in the legal field.

So I suggest you get creative and find a need and fill it, even if you have to pay your bills with some other job at first.

The fire and passion you brought with you when you stepped onto this campus on your first day – they are needed in the public interest.

It may not be glamorous. It may not be a path to wealth and fame.

And it certainly won't offer you the Hollywood intrigue you see on Law & Order.

It will – however – be the most rewarding work you ever do.

This applies to all our graduates, whether you have a job or not, or pursue a public interest career or choose to embrace a more traditional path...

The career you have chosen carries with it an obligation to find a way to contribute to your community.

Earlier this week, I had the privilege of attending the annual luncheon of the Colorado Lawyers Committee – a group dedicated to helping attorneys in private firms connect with meaningful opportunities to give something back.

For example, right now one of their top priority projects involves staffing legal night clinics in Greeley, where individuals and families who otherwise couldn't afford to, can obtain legal assistance for even the most basic of services.

Lawyers Committee volunteers also are key partners in Project Homeless Connect – events connecting homeless people in our community with necessary services like employment assistance, medical care, and even legal counsel to help resolve any outstanding violations with the city, that keep these people from getting back on their feet.

Every day, hundreds of Denver-area lawyers lend their time and expertise to programs like these, and I urge you, no matter what path you take when you leave here today, to use your talents to give back to our community.

To all of you graduating today, whether those who face uncertainty, those headed to corporate positions, or those looking to hang your own shingle...

On behalf of all those who've gone before you, I welcome you into a profession that stands as the backbone of our democracy.

Clarence Darrow once said, "You can only protect your liberties in this world by protecting the other man's freedom. You can only be free if I am free."

Regardless of how you each choose to practice law, the work you will do will be about protecting freedom.

Today, you don't just receive a degree; you graduate with a whole new set of ethics and responsibilities that will guide your actions in protecting our democracy.

From those who will serve the public interest, to those who will represent companies and their efforts to strengthen our economy, to those who will stand up for families and individuals, you all, every day of your career, will stand up for freedom in one way or another.

You will be subject to long hours, inhuman workloads, and – I'm sorry to say a relentless stream of bad lawyer jokes – but never forget that – as a lawyer in this great nation – you will lead a purpose-driven life.

We all know the classic Robert Frost poem that ends with, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference."

29 years ago, I could not have known the journey taking my law degree down a different path would lead me on.

From my first job (yes, I finally did get one) in the Appellate Division of the Colorado Public Defender's office...

To now sitting in the Leadership of the U.S. House of Representatives helping write the laws I once litigated...

Each experience I have had has built upon the previous one – and they all began with that moment in Carnegie Hall, when I – like you today – received my law degree.

For each of you, your unique journey begins today and each of you will choose your path

Whether working at a large law firm like my husband whose career has brought him a lifetime of remarkable challenge and great reward (and the most rewards from his innumerable hours of pro bono work)...

Or representing the interests of companies or non-profits working for a better nation...

Or standing in courtrooms or legislative chambers fighting for those who don't have a voice...

I can tell you all this with certainty – if you embrace the promise this degree provides you, you will find a life of meaning, shaped as you wish to shape it.

I wish you all that life of meaning and I welcome you to our most noble profession.

Thank you and Godspeed.