

Remarks by Justice Peter T. Zarella
Swearing-In Ceremony
November 4, 2016 at 10 a.m.

Thank you Chief Justice Rogers. It is a pleasure to address you this morning, and I am honored to be part of this momentous occasion in your lives.

Congratulations to all of the candidates and to your family members and friends on this day of significant achievement. Passing the bar is a critical milestone in every attorney's life. It is the culmination of years of hard work, perseverance and diligence, not to mention financial sacrifice for you and your loved ones. I commend each one of you for your success in completing this long journey.

Fifteen years ago, the Connecticut Supreme Court recognized that this important milestone was not being celebrated as fully as it could be and decided that a more fitting ceremony and recognition should take place. With support from former Chief Justice Sullivan, we organized the first statewide swearing in ceremony, which was held in November of 2001. Since then, we have held 31 ceremonies and have admitted and welcomed more than 7,100 candidates to the bar of the state of Connecticut.

Since this is the last ceremony that I will have the privilege of participating in and addressing, I would like to express my gratitude to Chief Justice Rogers and to former Chief Justice Sullivan for making this ceremony possible. I also appreciate the assistance I've received from my colleagues on the Supreme Court and would like to thank them for their continued support over the years.

Today's ceremony is important because it gives each of you an opportunity to take stock of your accomplishments and to contemplate where to go from here. Equally important, today's ceremony gives members of the bench and bar an opportunity to recognize your achievements and to share a bit of our hard-earned wisdom with you as you embark on your career.

In taking time to celebrate your accomplishments, we, the members of the bar for 10, 20, or in my case 42 years, can reflect on our past and remember the hopes that we had when we were first admitted. We can also reflect on our own achievements, as well as our disappointments, in an effort to provide you with advice that will help lead you to a satisfying career in the law.

But this ceremony is also important for another reason. It gives all of us a chance to consider our role in shaping the manner in which we converse with each other, not just as professionals but as individuals in this society.

I am sure that everyone in this room is appalled by the lack of civility that we have seen in the 2016 election. I would venture to say that even the most hardened amongst us, regardless of political affiliation, have been shocked by the level of venom and acrimony that has become commonplace during this election cycle.

In the face of this display, some of us want to turn away from the election entirely, others are angered or horrified, and still others feel the need to fight against this trend toward incivility. I would urge you to join this latter group.

We in the legal field are in a unique position to demonstrate that it is entirely possible to disagree with each other and yet respect each other at the same time. Our jobs require us to take adversarial positions each day. We are in the perfect position to show that individuals can hold radically different positions, viewpoints or ideals and resolve their differences in a manner that is respectful, well-informed and polite.

You may be wondering why your individual actions matter and how any one of us can influence the tone of discourse in our country. As we watch the 2016 election unfold, our natural tendency is to simply blame the candidates for the downward spiral in how we treat each other. But I believe that is an overly simplistic analysis. The bottom line is that these tactics wouldn't be used repeatedly if they didn't work! In other words, we must look inside ourselves and assess whether the vitriol that we see as this election unfolds reflects larger changes within ourselves and our society. Most importantly, if we disagree with these tactics and the tone that has become so prevalent, it is our responsibility to show that they don't work and are simply unacceptable!

So what can we do? As you join the practice of law, which is an adversarial process, you have tremendous power to influence the manner in which we disagree with each other. As attorneys, we swear to represent our clients' best interests and to engage in zealous advocacy on our clients' behalf. In my view, the most effective way to fulfill this obligation is by being well-prepared, polite and articulate. In fact, if you observe the most respected lawyers in this state, you will find that they have built their careers on hard work, professionalism and integrity rather than antagonism or intimidation.

There is no need to use a scorched earth policy to make your point. To the contrary, the most effective advocacy comes from reasoning rather than tone or posturing. We, in this adversarial profession, are perfectly situated to demonstrate that even the most contentious issues can be resolved with respectful and polite discourse.

As you embark on your legal career, I encourage you to identify the qualities that you admire in your fellow attorneys and to emulate them. Doing so will help you earn the respect and trust of the court, your colleagues and your clients, and will also set a positive example for others in our profession and for society as a whole.

I would also build on the Chief Justice's remarks and urge you to heed her call to perform pro bono service. As you help others to work through some of the most challenging and difficult times in their lives, you will learn about the law, yourself and life in general. Your clients may be losing their homes, their children, their livelihood or their freedom. They will be confused, angry and afraid. And as you help them, they can teach you a lot. These lessons, which can't be learned from law books or lectures, will make you a better lawyer and will help you to cultivate a sense of understanding and empathy that will serve you well throughout your career. Whether you are still looking for a job, or have already found a job, I can promise that you will find pro bono service incredibly meaningful and rewarding.

And it just happens to be one of the best ways to network with your colleagues. There is no question that learning from your fellow attorneys is critical in this profession, especially when you are just starting out. As you may already know, the law is not simply a business or a career. It is a lifelong communal pursuit of justice. And with that lifelong pursuit of justice comes responsibility, which may, at times, feel daunting.

Without a doubt, you will have cases that are complicated by an unexpected twist or turn of events. You may face long nights, when you are still up at 4 a.m. trying to craft that last sentence of your final argument, a few short hours before you are to deliver it. You will encounter clients who want you to squeeze blood from a rock or pull a rabbit from a hat, and refuse to understand why neither option is particularly realistic.

As you embark on your career, it is important to know that you are not alone in facing these challenges. There are both formal and informal avenues of mentoring by individuals who are willing to offer you their experiences so that you may avoid some of the pitfalls that the practice of law creates. I urge you to take advantage of the opportunity to learn from them.

Pro bono service is just one way to observe and learn from your fellow attorneys. Another way is to search within your firm or organization. You will find individuals with considerable experience who stand ready to help you with information and viewpoints gained through experience. The statewide and local bar associations, many of which are here today, also offer mentoring programs, in addition to continuing legal education and networking opportunities. Participating in these mentoring and educational programs gives you a chance to get to know your colleagues outside of the courtroom, to build relationships with them and to learn from their collective wisdom and experience.

On behalf of my colleagues on the Supreme Court, I welcome you to the legal profession and wish you much success in your career in the practice of law. Congratulations.