

# A Message to USD School of Law students

**Stephen Ferruolo**

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AM (3 days ago)

Dear Law Students,

On the very first day of your orientation to law school, I welcomed you into the legal profession and I spoke about the responsibility we all have as lawyers to ensure equal access to justice and the rule of law. At this time, which is so painful and distressing for all of us, especially the African-Americans in our law school community, I feel compelled to speak again about our professional responsibilities as lawyers, to express my own renewed commitment, as well as to ask for yours, to make concrete progress towards ensuring equality and justice for all in our country.

Over the past few weeks since watching the senseless murder of George Floyd, I have found myself thinking a lot about the parallels to the tragic events of 1968, when I was a student. It has pained me deeply to realize how little progress we have made in the more than 50 years since then, especially how we have so terribly failed to address the racism in our country. I have asked myself if I personally could have done more and whether I was part of the problem. Looking into the mirror of my soul, I now realize that I could have and I was. I made the mistake of accepting the narrative that progress was being made, things were getting better for Black people in our society, and racial tolerance and understanding were improving. I failed to understand the systemic and pervasive racism in our country. I do now. This is why I feel compelled to write to you. I do so not with the purpose of adding my own set of platitudes to the many you have already heard. But to make an admission of my own failure and misunderstanding, to address some of the principal things that I believe need to be done to remedy the injustices in our society, and hoping to inspire you, as future lawyers, to make a personal and professional commitment, as I am doing, to use your legal training and talents to do your part to effectuate real change.

As I look at the tragic situation in our county, the following call out to me as the priorities for that commitment to action:

- There needs to be systemic change to ensure equal access to justice and the true rule of law in American society.
- There needs to be a renewed commitment to actively calling out and combatting racism, discrimination, and hatred in every form.
- There needs to be redress for the centuries of cultural subordination that Black communities, above all, have suffered in our country, in particular to address the enduring disparities among races in income and wealth that have worsened in recent decades.
- There needs to be the guarantee of accessible and affordable health care for everyone in our country to remedy a continuing injustice that has become all the more evident recently as a result of the disparate impact that COVID-19 is having on Black and other minority communities.

You are right to ask me what you can do as law students. Let me suggest the following:

- Don't ever forget what you have been witnessing in our streets these past few weeks or lose sight of the injustices now so evident in our society when the news cycle turns to other issues. Keep your focus and retain the passion you are feeling now to be true changemakers.
- Keep your faith in the power of the law and in what you can do as lawyers using your knowledge of the law and the legal system to advance justice and equality.
- Demonstrate your solidarity and support for our Black students, as well as for others in our community, when they suffer discrimination or are targets of hateful incidents, as our Asian and Asian-American students have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Become active members of student organizations, work together to plan community events to address issues of racism and discrimination, and reach out to the law school administration for their support.
- Learn from the dedicated faculty we have here at USD School of Law.

Prominent among our professors, no one has taught or inspired me more than Professor Roy Brooks. In concluding his most recent book *The Racial Glass Ceiling*, Professor Brooks writes that breaking through the glass ceiling and achieving racial equality “involves confronting complex and uncomfortable questions about what we value as Americans.” During the rest of your time in law school, do not shy away from confronting any of those complex questions, however uncomfortable the answers may be.

This brings me to one final request. Please do not let this time pass and, 50 years from now, find yourselves where I am looking back regretfully, seeing the same racial injustices that we are witnessing today, and asking: what more could I have done?

And please also stay safe and healthy,

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