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Commencement Address: EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson, Pace Law School Commencement, May 16, 2010

Lisa P. Jackson
Environmental Protection Agency

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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson Pace Law School Commencement May 16, 2010

Congratulations class of 2010! It is wonderful to be here with you today.

Thank you Professor Kennedy, President Friedman, faculty, alumni, family and friends. I am proud to join you to honor all of the work these graduates have done, and to mark this milestone in their lives.

I know that none of this would have been possible without all the family, teachers, mentors, neighbors and friends that helped along the way.

We all owe them a big round of applause as well. Please join me in thanking them.

Let me thank you for providing me with this degree. Not only is this a great honor, but you have helped me reconcile some longstanding family issues.

I went to school for chemical engineering. I am a scientist by training. But as far as my mother was concerned, she sent me to school to become a doctor.

When I was younger and we would have our discussions, they might get a little animated as family discussions do. She would inevitably say to me, as I am sure many of your parents have said to you, "well if you like to argue so much, maybe you should try to be a lawyer."

For bestowing on me an honorary Doctor of Laws, let me thank you for putting both of those disputes to rest in one swoop. I am going to call my mother after I leave here today and tell her.

I really do consider it my great privilege to join you on this important day.

I want to congratulate you on the years of hard work, the endless reading of arcane and dense legal writing, and the long, sleepless nights of studying.

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Now that you have received your degrees, you can begin the hard work, the endless reading of arcane and dense legal writing, and long, sleepless nights of studying for the bar. Then it is on to the harder work, the endless reading and the long, sleepless nights of your first years in practice.

I encourage you to savor this moment.

This is truly an accomplishment to take great pride in. You have qualified yourself to take part in the workings of the world's oldest, and in my opinion, the world's best constitutional democracy.

The founders called our nation a great experiment to be tested and revised. In that regard, your degree in law is not so different from my degree in science. You will test the law, the foundation of our civic society, and that process will be enormously important in people's lives.

That is something that is especially true of environmental law. We have been a nation of laws for some two hundred and thirty years, yet fully formed environmental law has only been around for the last forty years.

This is still a developing field. It is my fervent hope that the United States will continue to lead the way in environmental law. As the graduates of one of the leading environmental law programs in this country, that means you have an important role to play.

I know a lot of you are also receiving a certificate of concentration in environmental law. In your programs there is a long list of names under the heading "Master of Laws in Environmental Law." Among those names are the very first Master of Laws graduates with a concentration in climate change.

As Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, this is an exciting place to be. I am very happy to be here to support all of your efforts.

That said, I did not think a speech on environmental policy, as important as it is, would quite live up to this moment. As I was considering what I wanted to talk about today, I started thinking about another place I call home: New Orleans, Louisiana.

I grew up in New Orleans and went to school there, getting my bachelor's degree in engineering at Tulane before attending graduate school at Princeton University in New Jersey.

New Orleans and the Gulf Coast have been in the news recently because of the BP oil spill from an exploded offshore drilling rig. If you have been keeping up with the news, you know that there is a great deal of concern as well as a great deal of uncertainty about nearly every aspect of this crisis.

The spill began as a human tragedy when the rig exploded and killed 11 workers. These were fathers, brothers, and members of the Gulf community.

It has since turned into an environmental emergency as well. I have made two trips to the Gulf Coast to meet with the responders and local community members.

They are working through complex, often unprecedented challenges. They are trying to find the best, most creative answers as fast as they possibly can, and they have to do their very best work on little to no sleep.

Think about the most intense week of your time here. Imagine it stretching on with no definitive stopping point in sight. And then imagine that the President of the United States has asked to see your grades. That will give you some understanding of what our responders are working through right now. Let me just say how grateful I am for their work.

This is, of course, is not the first time the Gulf Coast has faced these challenges. Almost five years ago Hurricane Katrina ripped through New Orleans and the Gulf.

I actually happened to be there at the time, visiting my mother for her birthday. I managed to drive her to safety, but her home, the home I grew up in, was flooded and destroyed. My mother lost everything she had.

For the last five years the Gulf Coast has been steadily rebuilding. They have made progress restoring their neighborhoods, their schools, and their environment. In recent years there was, for the first time in a long time, a real sense of hope in New Orleans and other Gulf communities.

Now they must face a new crisis.

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So when I traveled down there, I prepared to meet with a great deal of anger. I anticipated the feelings of people who were all too familiar with deep anxiety and frustration.

But what I found was something different. The fishermen and shrimpers and other men and women turned out to our meetings in droves. And the one thing they all wanted to know, the question I heard more than anything else was, "how can I help?"

"How can I help?"

Think about that. Here are people who have only begun to recover from one major setback and they are hearing that an environmental catastrophe could once again decimate their way of life.

Some of the fishermen and shrimpers had just made the last runs before their waters were closed. No one could tell them when, or if, they would ever open again. The wetlands they grew up with, the jobs they support their families with, even the air they breathe has been suddenly thrown into jeopardy.

Yet they did not ask, "who is to blame?" or "who is going to pay for this?" They asked, "how can I help?"

I am sharing this story with you today for a number of reasons.

First, because most of you can only follow what is happening on the 24-hour news channels, where you are likely to see finger pointing, partisanship, attacks, and counter attacks. That back and forth is a bad example for people my age to set for people your age. It is also a false presentation of reality.

As individuals who will have the power to shape the laws of our land, it is critical for you to realize that in the real world, when a neighbor has a problem or a community is struggling, people ask, "how can I help?"

That may be hard to believe if you use politics and television news as your guide. But think about all the volunteers helping out with the floods in Nashville. Think about the rush of donations to Haiti following the devastating earthquake there. Think about a friend you have, or a family you know that fell on hard times. Then think of all the people who asked, "how can I help?"

My second reason is that asking "how can I help?" is in your own self interest.

After living through the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, we know that problems faced by any American have the potential to touch the lives of every American. But that is not exactly what I am talking about.

Nor am I talking about getting a tax break for pro-bono work.

I recently got a letter from an EPA engineer working in Michigan, who wrote to me about perfect strangers thanking him after hearing that he works to clean up the environment. One woman came from a town that had a rash of cancer cases from chemicals that had been dumped into the local water. He wanted me to know that, as he wrote, “people recognize the work we do and are grateful for it.”

That is something money cannot buy. It is a benefit no title can give. You cannot get it from becoming partner. Even glory and fame will not give this to you. The Greek General Pericles ruled Athens during the Golden Age, helped build the Acropolis and the Parthenon, and enjoyed widespread fame. With all of those accomplishments, Pericles concluded that, “what you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.”

How many graduates of this institution have woven their influence into the lives of others? How many of you will do the same?

That is the true measure of success. If you want real satisfaction with the choices you make once you leave here my advice to you is to start by asking, “how can I help?”

My third reason for this story is that with the urgent issues before us, we need you to ask, “how can I help?”

We face extraordinary challenges, from dealing with climate change, to rebuilding the global economy, to fighting disease and poverty at home and abroad.

Confronting these challenges will be all-hands-on-deck effort. Solutions will not come easy. We need every able person working to make this world a better, safer place. We need you to ask, “how can I help?”

Which brings me to my final reason for sharing this story today. And that is to challenge you.

“How can I help?” is not just my aspiration for the Class of 2010, it is my expectation.

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If the people of the Gulf Coast can rise to the challenge, and lift each other up at a moment of great need, then we should expect nothing less of ourselves and each other.

Compared to their situation, you are not in the depth of a crisis. You are not facing the great loss of opportunities and livelihood. On the contrary, a world of new opportunities has just opened for you.

You have spent two decades working towards today. You have pushed yourself to higher levels and demanded that the best you have to offer gets better year after year. The smartest way to put that training to use is to ask, “how can I help?”

Let me close by saying that we will be right beside you.

The people here who, through the course of your life, have always been there to ask, “how can I help?” when you needed them. Your teachers and mentors, your family and friends, your fellow graduates; they are all going to continue to support you and help you, and they will be proud of everything you accomplish.

I am happy to celebrate with you today, Class of 2010. I am excited to see where you will take us. Thank you very much, and congratulations once again.