

Mark T. Cramer
2023 Caruso School of Law Commencement
Distinguished Alumnus Speech

I always love coming back to this campus—and I have so many fond memories of my time here. That’s a pretty remarkable thing to be able to say about law school. But that’s Pepperdine.

Thank you so much for this recognition. I don’t feel old enough to be “distinguished,” so I am both touched and horrified to receive this award today. Last night at Baccalaureate, Dean Caron mentioned that most of the Class of 2023 was born about 25 years ago which, incidentally, is how long ago I graduated. It occurred to me that “distinguished” is just a euphemism for being, well, twice as old as the graduating class.

I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania. My dad is a lawyer and has his own law firm in my hometown. I worked for him when I was a kid until I graduated from college. My dad and I had a plan: I would get my law degree, return home, and join his law firm. We talked about this plan often. We confirmed the plan the night before I got in my car to drive cross-country to start law school.

That plan changed about 5 days and 2,700 miles later when I arrived on campus in Malibu. My parents were gracious, and I want to thank them for that, because I know they were disappointed that I decided to stay west.

I didn't know a soul when I got here, but that didn't last long. Thanks to Pepperdine, I'm blessed with an amazing family, wonderful friends, and a job that I love.

Pepperdine made that possible. Not just because it armed me with a law degree. But because it made me part of a special community. You've been here long enough, you must have your own stories of people who've made a difference in your lives. I have a long—and growing—list of my own, but I want to spotlight two people today.

First, President (Jim) Gash. Thanks to Jim, I got my first job as a lawyer. Jim interviewed me in a room in the law library in 1997, when he was working at Kirkland & Ellis, and both of us had more hair. (And, apparently, when most of you were being born.) Jim helped launch my career and I am forever grateful to him for that. I am even more grateful to him because I met my wife at Kirkland. So, in some ways, my kids owe their lives to Jim and to Pepperdine.

Let me tell you something, Jim has paid it forward for decades—and continues to pay it forward every day. Thank you, Jim.

The other person I want to spotlight is a former professor I never met. I didn't learn about him until long after I graduated. His name was Duane Faw and he was among the first professors that Dean Phillips hired at the Law School in the early 1970s.

Professor Faw was a retired Marine Corps General. He was a man of deep faith and served with distinction in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam.

While he was in Vietnam, General Faw forged close friendships with a number of Vietnamese citizens and government officials. Years later, when Saigon fell, General Faw sponsored more than a dozen Vietnamese refugees for American Citizenship.

One of those refugees was Hieu Le. Hieu had escaped Vietnam and settled in Orange County not far from the original Law School campus. Somehow, without the Internet or cell phones or facebook or Instagram or even MySpace, *somehow* Hieu reunited with his girlfriend Chau (who was also a Vietnamese refugee) and the two

of them married. General Faw attended their wedding and was a devoted friend.

When General Faw learned that Hieu and Chau had applied for a mortgage and been rejected by the bank, he went to the bank, co-signed the mortgage and provided a personal guarantee so that they could buy their home. They still live in that house, where they raised two children. Both of their children went on to become successful lawyers and start families of their own.

Why am I telling you all of this? Because one of those children is my wife, Tracy. Once again, my kids owe their lives to Pepperdine.

When Tracy and I first started dating and her father heard I went to Pepperdine, his eyes lit up. He told me this story. He gushed about Pepperdine—not because of its US News ranking or its bar passage rates—but because of General Faw and the kind of person he was.

General Faw lived Pepperdine's motto: "Freely ye received, freely give." General Faw freely gave to a family of Buddhists from Vietnam and changed the arc of their lives. He paid it forward. And, in case you were wondering, Hieu and Chau paid their mortgage in full.

The bank never needed to invoke General Faw's personal guarantee.

Years ago, inspired by the example of people like General Faw, I helped establish an endowed scholarship at the Law School called The "Pay It Forward" Scholarship. We have all enjoyed the shade of trees we didn't plant. We've all benefited from the efforts and generosity of those who came before us. The recipients of the scholarship—and some of you are here today—are encouraged to contribute to the scholarship fund when they are able and to "give back" by paying it forward. My hope is that this scholarship causes ripples that eventually become waves that make a difference in people's lives and in the Pepperdine community long after I'm gone.

Graduates, you are now an official part of the Pepperdine community. Pepperdine will forever be part of who you are and you will forever be part of Pepperdine. That is a great privilege—and it comes with great responsibility. In the spirit of George Pepperdine, Dean Phillips, President Gash, General Faw, and so many others who are part of

Pepperdine's legacy, I encourage you to look for ways to pay it forward in your own way—and make waves.

Congratulations, Class of 2023—to each of you and to your families. Thank you for this recognition and thank you for letting me share your special day.