Eric H. Holder, Jr.
Attorney General of the United States
Duquesne Law School Centennial Speech, February 23, 2011

Thank you, Dean [Ken] Gormley. I appreciate your kind words, and I want to thank you for inviting and welcoming me to this beautiful campus. It is a privilege to join you in commemorating 100 years of achievement and contribution—and to commend your leadership in strengthening Duquesne Law School’s tradition of success.

I am honored to help kick off this centennial anniversary—and to be among so many distinguished leaders and members of Pennsylvania’s bench and bar, including United States Attorney for Pennsylvania’s Western District, David Hickton.

As Ken mentioned, we have known each other for more than a decade now. Not only is he an accomplished lawyer and writer, I can assure you that he is also an enthusiastic ambassador for this school.

Ken never misses an opportunity to sing the praises—as he should—of Duquesne’s students, faculty, and alumni—and this school’s unique and dynamic approach to legal education.

Indeed, this is an extraordinary place.

For the last century, since the Holy Ghost Fathers founded this law school in 1911, Duquesne has stood as a force for progress—and as an institution dedicated to training highly skilled, ethical lawyers and to strengthening the effectiveness and integrity of our justice system.

In fact, your school was established for a specific, and critically important, purpose: to train those who had settled in Pittsburgh to work in this city’s steel mills and factories—some of whom, like my own father and all four of my grandparents, arrived in Ameri-

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ca with little more than an appreciation of our nation's past and faith in its future.

The law school's very first Dean, President Judge Joseph Swearington of the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County, started a tradition of sending students up the street to the courthouse, so that they could observe the practice of law and see our justice system in action.

A hundred years later, Duquesne Law School is still known for its hands-on approach to legal training—and for producing talented, well-prepared lawyers. And it is widely recognized across this city, and beyond for its commitment to public interest and public service work.

That commitment dates back to this law school's earliest days. In the early and middle decades of the Twentieth Century, Duquesne prepared several graduates who were among the early few who opened the doors of the legal profession to women and racial minorities. This law school admitted women as early as 1915—when some states did not even allow women to practice law.

Theron Hamilton, the first African-American graduate of the law school, received his degree in 1925—long before many of America's law schools began to admit racial minorities.

Percy Langster—another alumnus, became the first African-American district attorney in the United States in 1948.

Ronald Davenport, the seventh Dean of the Law School, was not only one of the youngest law deans in the nation when he was appointed in 1970—at age 35. He was also among the first African-Americans to serve as the dean of a major American law school.

Your alumnas include Carol Los Mansmann, who also was a professor here, as well as one of the first women to serve on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. Judge Donetta Ambrose, the first woman to serve as the Chief Judge of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania, is also an alumna—as is Judge Kate Ford Elliott, the President Judge Emeritus of the Superior Court of Pennsylvania.

Quite an impressive line-up.
Duquesne alumni also have a long history of working with—and working for—our nation's Department of Justice.


Three decades later, your current Dean, Ken Gormley, organized a nationally broadcast event on "Robert Kennedy As Attorney General," commemorating the work—and legacy—of one of my heroes, and one of our nation's most outstanding Attorneys General.

And of course, over the years, the Justice Department—and the American people—have benefitted from the contributions of numerous Duquesne Law School graduates who have served in our offices across the world.

One recent veteran of the Justice Department's Honors Program—2006 alumna Kristine Fritz—is a third-generation Duquesne Law School graduate. Today, she is also an Assistant United States Attorney in North Carolina. I hope—and I suspect—that many of you follow in her footsteps.

Throughout my career, I have had the honor to work with a number of Duquesne alumni, including former U.S. Attorney Alan "Jerry" Johnson; Senior Federal District Judge Gustavo Diamond; and Peter Varian, a 15-year veteran of the Justice Department, among others.

This tradition of service and achievement is extraordinary. And, for today's students, it is now yours to carry forward.

Each of you has a remarkable opportunity—to study the law, and then use it to make a powerful difference for your fellow citizens.

Whether you eventually lead movements, decide cases from the bench, return to the classroom to teach, run for office, advise clients, or defend the accused, every student here today can—and
will—define the future. You may choose to offer input into how our nation is going to combat crime, protect our national security, strengthen our education and health care systems, safeguard the environment, or ensure that all Americans have the opportunity to access legal services. But each of you can find ways to call on our country to aim higher, become better, and do more for the most vulnerable among us.

Not only do you have the ability to create the change and progress you hope to see. You also have the responsibility.

Today—as in 1911—this city, this state, and our entire nation, face both unprecedented threats and unforeseen opportunities. We also face the choice of a century—a choice between a future of service and a future of apathy.

Will we continue our nation’s long and noble commitment to the pursuit of justice, no matter how difficult or consequential the sacrifices involved? Will we take the steps, and overcome the obstacles, necessary to generate change? Will we summon the determination and optimism that has fueled our nation’s history of advancement—and, 100 years ago, inspired the creation of this law school?

Today, I call on each of you to choose action, to choose compassion, and to choose a future of service—the service of justice.

I realize that for many of you public service is already a top priority. It’s already a central part of your daily lives. Many of you are active in legal clinics, working to ensure that the citizens of this city understand their rights, as well as their responsibilities. Others serve as mentors to high-school students; as advocates for the protection of this region’s rivers and wildlife; as lifelines for people struggling to access and navigate our justice system; and as leaders in ensuring the rights of all.

Your commitment to service isn’t surprising. Since the school’s founding, Duquesne Law students have always answered the call to service.

In 1963, they called on our nation’s Justice Department—and Attorney General Robert Kennedy—to enforce the statutes and the spirit of our laws to ensure voting rights and to further the
cause of integration fully and peacefully. And they cheered with so many others across this nation when, in June of that year, my late sister-in-law, Vivian Malone Jones, was one of two African-American students who stepped past Governor George Wallace to integrate the University of Alabama.

She was able to do so because of the courage, compassion, and service of others, including several lawyers with an unyielding commitment to justice—the type of attorneys our nation needs and that many of you hope to emulate. Today, we must never let their efforts—and their achievements that have marked our past—be in vain. The responsibility for protecting our nation's hard-won progress now falls on the shoulders of today's leaders, teachers, and students. It falls on each of you.

Whether you'll be leaving this campus in a few months or a few years, each of you can find a way to call our nation to aim higher, become better, and do more for the most vulnerable among us. Each of you can keep faith with the motto of this school: "Salus Populi Suprema Lex." The welfare of the people is the highest law.

No matter what path you chose for yourself and your future, you will surely be surrounded by opportunities to serve the cause of justice. Each of you must work to make a positive and enduring impact on the world that we share and the future that we all seek.

I don't expect that meeting our shared goals—and fulfilling our common responsibilities—will be easy. But I am hopeful. And, as I look around this auditorium, I can't help but feel optimistic about where we will arrive.

One hundred years later, the foresight, generosity, and optimism that your founders showed in establishing this law school is still cause for celebration. So is the spirit of service that—from 1911 to 2011—has animated this school's work. I hope—and, if history is any guide, I can be certain—that you will continue this great tradition.

I wish you luck. And I will be counting on you all.

Thank you.