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Supreme Court Justice Bacon urges law school graduates to help others in their legal careers

ALBUQUERQUE – Supreme Court Justice C. Shannon Bacon encouraged law school graduates today to "engage in the law of people" to help others and strive to become a "servant leader" to accomplish positive change.

"Servant leadership, which is an altruistic approach to leading by focusing on the support and growth of others, is urgently needed in our legal community. Servant leadership values listening, empathy, healing, foresight, awareness, and building community," Justice Bacon said in prepared remarks as the keynote speaker at the University of New Mexico School of Law commencement.

"The legal community and the judiciary are under fire. We are suffering from a distinct lack of public trust and confidence," the justice said. "This lack of public trust and confidence undermines trust in the rule of law and erodes democracy. I posit that servant leadership is a way to stem this tide. Servant leadership will foster the integrity, transparency, and accountability of our profession. It is critical to the very future of democracy, as we are the defenders of justice, the Constitution, liberty and just causes."

Servant leadership, the justice explained, is a term coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in a 1970 essay after he had retired from a long career in management at a telecommunications company.

"I truly believe that if we, as a legal community, embrace this approach to our roles as lawyers, judges, and community members, we can change the narrative about our profession and create a narrative, the one which we already believe, that being a lawyer is a noble profession — one that can change the world or change the life of a child," said Justice Bacon.

The justice urged the graduates to "remember who helped you get here – parents, partners, children, siblings, tias and tios, professors and teachers, coaches" – but also to remember the "forgotten."

“Whatever career choices you make –working for a firm, a corporation, the government, legal aid, academia – the most important part of being a counselor of law is remembering to help people,” Justice Bacon said.

She noted that more than 380,000 New Mexicans live below poverty guidelines and more than 3,000 people in Albuquerque lack housing.

“These are our neighbors who are most frequently forgotten, excluded, defenseless, and treated as less than,” said Justice Bacon. “These are the people in our community, that by virtue of your degree, you are uniquely trained to help.”

Chief Justice Bacon was appointed to the Supreme Court in 2019, and won election in 2020. Before joining the state's highest court, she served as a judge on the Second Judicial District Court for nearly nine years and was the presiding civil judge.

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Justice C. Shannon Bacon (Photo courtesy of the Supreme Court of New Mexico)