

“Be determined”

Kelly Ayotte Stresses Hard Work, Perseverance in Commencement Keynote Address

Friday, May 19, 2017



“If you are willing, you will learn the most about yourself from your mistakes and setbacks. Own them and learn from them,” Kelly Ayotte said during her remarks at UNH Manchester’s 32nd annual commencement ceremony on May 18. “You will emerge stronger as a result. In the long run, nothing can stop the combination of hard work and perseverance.”

Ayotte, former U.S. Senator from New Hampshire and the state’s first female attorney general, delivered the keynote address at

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Thursday’s proceedings to the college’s 245 graduates.

Ayotte shared her professional path from law school to prosecutor, attorney general and eventually the U.S. Senate, highlighting the challenges she’s faced along the way. Be courageous in the face of obstacles, she told graduates, stay resolute in your goals.

“If you want to do something, refuse to give up—no matter how many setbacks you face,” Ayotte said. Read her full speech below:

"President Huddleston, Dean Decelle, Chairman Riley and Members of the UNH Board of Trustees, Senator Dellasandro, Students, Faculty and Staff, Parents, family and friends. Thank you for inviting me to celebrate this very special day with you.

To the Class of 2017: Congratulations!

Today you can finally relax, your assignments are all turned in. Your exams are done.

This is the time to recognize all that you have achieved.

Many of you have pursued your degree while working full time and taking care of your families. That’s not easy. And we admire you for it. It takes special determination and grit to earn your degree while holding a full time job or while taking care of a family.

Because of what you have accomplished, you graduate today well prepared to pursue your dreams, because you already know that to be successful you have to be able to manage more than one responsibility. You are well positioned to find that balance between your profession, your family life and taking care of your health -- so you can

be your best -- to live a full and rewarding life.

Days like today don't just happen. You all worked hard. You made sacrifices. And you can take great pride in receiving your degree.

But none of us truly accomplishes what we do on our own. There are people here today with you, parents, spouses, family, friends and mentors who were there to support you along the way. People who made a difference for you.

Can we have a round of applause for the collective efforts of all who helped our graduates make this day possible.

As I look out on at all of you—I am struck by a simple truth.

You are the future. Not just of our nation—but of our state. And we live in a great State!

With your degree from UNH, I encourage you to do something I did—Make NH your home. Continue to grow your roots here.

You can have a rewarding career here and live in a vibrant state with an excellent quality of life.

After going out of state for my degrees, the best decision I made was to come back to NH to build my life. There are so many opportunities in NH to get involved in your community and to be part of something bigger than just yourself.

Whether it's serving in local or state government, volunteering with a non-profit, coaching a team. Or even running for office—if I could do it, so can you.

I know for sure, had I started my career somewhere else, I would not have the amazing experiences that I have had and the privilege of serving NH.

I can promise you that if you build your post graduate life here, you will not regret it and will get so much in return!

Now some of you may have a clear vision of what you want to do next and have it all lined up. And others of you may still be trying to decide what comes next. I can only guarantee this much: your life won't proceed in a path that follows a straight line. And where the path leads you will probably surprise you.

In my own career, I couldn't have imagined how many twists and turns would come up along the way—often what looks like a detour is actually taking you right to your true calling.

After I graduated from law school, the thought of becoming a prosecutor or an Attorney General or a Senator for that matter, never crossed my mind. In fact, my plan was to go to work for a private law firm to make a good salary to pay off my student loans.

So I went to work for a big law firm right here in Manchester, and then one day one of the more experienced lawyers at the firm came to me and asked me to cover for him at an arraignment in federal court. An arraignment is the beginning of a criminal case.

Eager to prove myself, I said yes. Little did I know, he was sending me to cover a very serious criminal case. It involved 5 defendants charged with bank robberies up and down the East coast and a bank robbery in Hudson NH in which unfortunately, two guards were murdered.

Let me be honest with you, I had only been a lawyer for a few years and I had never done an arraignment or any criminal trial. Never mind one in such an important and serious case. I was way over my head and I was surrounded by much more experienced lawyers.

Even my client, had more experience in the courtroom than I did!

In fact when I went down to meet him in the cell block, when he saw me, a young woman, this very tough guy had a look of terror on his face and the only thing I could think to tell him was, Don't worry, I'm not your only lawyer. I'm sure that was reassuring to him!

At that first hearing, I spent most of the day watching the more experienced lawyers to make sure I was actually facing in the right direction in court.

I wasn't exactly sure what I had gotten myself into. But when I returned to the office that night, I told the lawyer that had sent me into the lion's den that I wanted to work on that case. And as a result, my first jury trial was a 3 month trial in federal court where I realized that I loved being in the courtroom, and that I wanted to be a prosecutor serving the public and helping victims of crime.

So I applied for a job as a prosecutor at the Attorney General's Office and guess what -- I didn't get the job. But I kept at it and eventually they hired me, I became a murder prosecutor and within a decade I became the first woman to serve as Attorney General of NH and years later, a US Senator.

Foremost, what I took from that experience and many others in my career, is you can't be afraid to take risks.

It is the only way you can truly find out what you can really accomplish. Push the boundaries of your comfort zone to find the true potential within yourself.

Find out what you're passionate about. There's a common thread with the many successful, happy people I have met over my life. They are passionate about what they do. It's really tough to be good at something that you don't care

about. What your passion is and what you care about, will be different for each of you.

As Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple once said, “Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking. Don’t Settle.”

And be determined. If you want to do something. Refuse to give up --no matter how many setbacks you face.

This fall, I lost my reelection to the Senate by a narrow margin. And it was tough. I wanted to win. And I had to pick myself up again.

I am reminded of the words of Winston Churchill, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts.”

We have all had times in our lives when we have worked hard for something we wanted but it didn’t work out. There is not a successful person out there who has not had failures.

But success is not the best teacher. Often when things are going our way, we don’t take the time to evaluate how we can be better. If you are willing, you will learn the most about yourself from your mistakes and setbacks. Own them and learn from them.

And you will emerge stronger as a result. In the long run, nothing can stop the combination of hard work and perseverance.

If things don’t go your way, get back up and try again until you reach your goal. And don’t settle for anything less than you are capable of!

And I know you won't. You have already demonstrated that by earning your degree. Enjoy this important and great moment. All your hard work has paid off! We are so proud of you.

With what you have learned at UNH, you have the tools to have a rewarding and successful career right here in NH.

I want to thank you for having me here today—It is a deep honor to share this special day with you and your families. Congratulations again! I wish you every success in your careers and your lives!

I know that we will see great achievements from the UNH class of 2017! Good luck!"

WRITTEN [Kassidy Taylor](#) | Marketing & Communications, UNH

BY: [Manchester](#) | kassidy.taylor@unh.edu

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