

**BU Law Commencement Address**

May 18, 2008

Congresswoman Niki Tsongas

**Thank you for inviting me to share this evening with you.**

**And good evening to members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, honorees, proud parents, families and friends and especially deserving graduates of the Boston University Law School Class of 2008. I know this is a time of great satisfaction at having withstood the rigors of law school, relief that you have arrived at this moment of closure and anticipation at what lies ahead. Congratulations!**

**As I stand here tonight it is an opportunity for me to reflect on the role BU Law has played in my life and how, for me, it created opportunities, not always available to women at the time I first entered law school. And also, how once available, it shaped my life as it does anyone who has the great privilege of attending law school.**

**BU Law has come in and out of my life at different points.**

**I first entered law school in the Fall of 1970. I had been married a year and moved to Lowell, Massachusetts where my husband had entered the political arena as a member of the Lowell City Council.**

**Several years earlier I had decided to attend law school after spending a fateful summer typing a criminal law textbook for a professor at Georgetown University Law School. This**

was a summer job as I waited to begin my first real job as a social worker in New York City's Department of Welfare. Day after Day I typed cases and as I typed I read and as I read I concluded that I would like to go to law school.

Having been a religion major in college, this was completely unexpected. At the time I did not know any women lawyers but change was in the air and as a student at an all female college I knew classmates who planned to go to law school regardless of the challenges they might face in gaining admission.

I applied to BU because it was a convenient commute and because I knew that, unlike other Boston and Cambridge based law schools, it accepted a significant number of women--- approximately one quarter of its incoming class was female. Later I learned how BU came to be a leader in recruiting and accepting women into its law school.

About five years ago I joined the board of a Boston based non profit and was pleased to find that a fellow Board member was the gentleman who had been BU Law's Assistant Dean of Admissions and who had, in fact, written me my letter of acceptance, a man named Earnest Haddad. I told him that I had recently come across his letter. From him, I learned that he began recruiting women in order to upgrade the caliber of students coming into the law school. To do so, he traveled to the many women's colleges in the New England region and found that BU Law was the FIRST law school to ever come recruiting at these highly competitive and excellent schools!

How much has changed in the past forty years as BU and many other law schools now have classes where half or more of the students are women.

**As we today take for granted women's participation in law schools across the country, BU Law deserves great credit for opening the door to women so many years ago and I am grateful for having been able to walk through that door and the many others that opened as a result of the education I received here.**

**My path through law school, however, was not a straight one. I left after a year and a half, and returned twelve years later, in 1984. The intervening years had been remarkable.**

**My husband had successfully sought election to the U.S. House of Representatives and to the U.S. Senate and we now had three wonderful daughters. But in 1983 my husband learned that he had a serious form of cancer and we made the important decision to return to private life to spend precious time together as a family and so that I could pursue the law degree I had postponed many years earlier.**

**I was fortunate that BU quickly accepted me back. Grateful for having been accepted in 1970 when women were just beginning to enter the field of law in great numbers, I will also always be grateful for the school's willingness to accommodate me so many years later.**

**After graduating I went on to form the first all women's law firm in Lowell--if just two of us a law firm makes--and migrated to work as an administrator at a community college--eventually becoming a dean, and most recently I have the great honor of representing the Fifth District of Massachusetts in the U.S. House of Representatives.**

**As a new member of Congress, I have traveled two paths.**

**The first is a path of remembrance. I fondly recall our years in Washington from 1974 to 1984 with Paul and our growing family. The life I shared with Paul was guided by our efforts to engage government as a catalyst for change--to revitalize a city, preserve our nation's natural treasures, strengthen our economy, create vibrant educational opportunities, secure equal rights for all, protect the most vulnerable in our society, keep our country safe. These remain my goals.**

**The second path is that of a new legislator. I have also had the opportunity to reflect on the unique obligations and opportunities shared by every member of Congress and on the role of the United States in the world.**

**This has been brought home to me in a number of ways.**

**Last October, I was elected to Congress on a Tuesday and sworn in on a Thursday. My first vote immediately after being sworn in was to override our President's veto of an expanded Children's Health Insurance program. As I went to vote by pushing a green button for yes, I was struck by how easy it was simply to push a button. And yet how important it is for each one of us in congress to be ever mindful of the great impact pushing that button has on the lives of millions across this country, and at times across the world--to never let it become too routine.**

**I also serve on the Budget Committee. In the early part of this year the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, Ben Bernanke, came to testify about the stimulus package. The hearing was conducted in a smallish hearing room and had a certain intimacy and familiarity to it. However, its seriousness was brought home to me when the next day every newspaper in this country and many across the world closely reported his comments. An important reminder to we Americans that what we do here ripples across the world with great consequence.**

**And in January I traveled to Iraq as part of a congressional delegation. As I, along with other members of Congress, got off the plane in Baghdad International Airport, I was immediately struck by the incredible array of military might we have brought to bear in that country.**

**It was so evident in our physical presence--our soldiers, our equipment, in the geographic space our bases occupy. It struck me that no other nation in the world could do this--and borrow its way through such an endeavor. We must be ever mindful of thoughtfully exercising this great capacity.**

**This evening marks for each of you an ending, but also the beginning of a path that will have many twists and turns. Law school is a discipline that has trained your mind for whatever path you may choose and your law degree is an invaluable resource to you as you navigate life's challenges.**

**It is also an instrument for change.**

**This possibility for change is our inspiration and hope: to address our most pressing problems, to strive for excellence, innovation and fairness, to leave the world a better place, to change our future.**

**And as you graduate today, you have the most basic resource you need to effect change--a remarkable education. You have worked hard to achieve it; this work has been supported by your loved ones with whom you are sharing this most important moment.**

**But as you leave this evening I hope you will always remember that the power that resides in your degree can be engaged as a catalyst for change-- in your lives---but also in the lives of others, of a community, of a nation and of our world. You are the future change makers. May you exercise this great power with restraint, decency and a commitment to the common good. Thank you and Godspeed.**