It's a real honor for me to be speaking to you today. It wasn't long ago that I was a student here, looking for a way to make helpful change in the world. So even though I've been asked to help remind us all of why our work in the public interest is so important, I want you to know that I am also here for a very selfish reason: I, and my colleagues at legal aid, draw tremendous inspiration from the work done by law students who have dedicated themselves to working in the public interest.

It is your energy, your persistent faith in the power of advocacy to help our clients and our causes, that reminds us how to go forward faithfully, energetically, and powerfully. Especially in this challenging time of budget cuts and increased demand for pro bono legal services of all kinds, we really couldn't do it without you, so I want to thank the students here today for your decision, and your devotion to the public interest.

When I saw the program for today, I was also inspired to see this list of recipients. Most of these folks are people I have either worked with or come to know through my involvement with the public interest legal community. All of those I know are on my short list of most-admired colleagues, so I want to add my voice in advance to the chorus of congratulations. They certainly deserve these accolades, and I commend OLSPIF, the Pro Bono Board, and the law student voters on their choices.

Each of us who works for the public good knows which injustices, which particular needs have inspired us to action. Whatever your area of focus, you could probably tell endless horror stories, and provide shocking statistics of how important interests are being steamrolled or ignored. Even beyond the stories and statistics, perhaps you instinctively sense a need, and cannot help but work to meet it.

On that point I will share a personal story:

When I was about seven I saw an episode of Alvin and the Chipmunks, in which Alvin was struck on the head. This injury affected his thinking, causing him to believe that he was an angel, sent from heaven to do good deeds, and so he hastily, clumsily set about looking for good deeds to perform.
While rushing across a street, Alvin knocked over an elderly man in the crosswalk, causing the man's groceries to spill all over the street. But Alvin, in his haste, did not stop to help the old man, and even Simon and Theodore, who were frantically pursuing Alvin, did not stop to help, although they did shout their apologies on Alvin's behalf as they rushed by.

The old man thanked them for their courtesy, but then he was left alone in the street, with his food scattered everywhere. Even as a young child, I sensed that this person was probably on a fixed income, appeared to move only with difficulty, and was in danger not only of being run over there in the street, but also of being unable gather up his food before it too was run over.

I thought to myself: that could happen to anyone. You could lose your food, and if you don't have a way to buy more, you're in serious trouble. So now I am a watchdog over our social safety net, because I learned at a young age that I can't help but worry about those who rely on it.

The point is that all of us who work in the public interest, regardless of the subject area, have something like that inside us that propels us to action.

Yet there are plenty of examples, plenty of faces and names and stories, plenty of numbers which tell us how desperate the need is for our help, how urgent it is that our struggles continue. Whether it is the overwhelming majority of legal aid applicants who are unable to be served, or the looming starvation of animals whose habitat is being lost to climate change, the oppression of ethnic minorities or the persecution of minority viewpoints on religion, the torture and manipulation of accused persons by police or the still persistent absence of equal pay for equal work, the needs are out there, and we are the ones who must meet them.

A great thing about the public interest law movement is that it provides an umbrella for these very different practice areas which nonetheless face common challenges. Where else can you find environmental attorneys rubbing elbows with public defenders, tenants' rights lawyers standing side by side with international human rights lawyers, and those who fight for gender equality alongside those who resist the extinction of indigenous cultures?

I think our common umbrella is a great fit for its purpose, because even though the fights we fight are very different, we are united by some very grim realities. You see, the opponents we each face have a lot in common as well.
There is always an imbalance of power, between the public-interest client or cause, and its opponents. The imbalance of power may spring from widely-held intolerances, or from the financial incentives that drive huge corporations, or from the indifference of inscrutable government bureaucracies, but whatever the source, our opponents have this in common: they are always big.

This bigness, whether merely insidious or highly organized and directed, gives them intangible advantages, a long reach, a strong skeleton that makes it hard to comprehend how fully they can resist our efforts. Their size alone is a resource they cannot help but wield against us.

Often this bigness carries with it another common feature: our opponents usually have a lot of money. They can outspend our clients and our causes many times over, and they do so from a place of comfort and confidence.

This confidence comes not only from their money, but from yet another advantage that they enjoy: they have time. They try to outlast us because they can afford to be patient, they can sit by and wait for heavy systems and old prejudices to grind slowly along while our clients and our causes grow weary with the months, the years, the decades of struggle.

Agencies, corporations, intolerances, and greed may grow old but they do not simply pass away with time and they don't go extinct. They only die if killed, and they only change if forced.

That brings up another shared feature of our opponents: they have the benefit of inertia. They were set in motion by unresisted forces. They will all keep moving in the same direction they are moving now, doing exactly what they have always done, or worse, unless acted upon by an external force.

We are that external force.

In fact, as long as we're talking physics, it's really more than inertia that they have on their side. If we don't hold on to our clients and our causes, they may fall helplessly away. If we don't resist the never-ending pull of wealthy interests, or of institutional apathy, then its force will continue to take hold, to overwhelm our clients and our causes, and the things we are here to fight for will plummet to their destruction.
You see where this is going. The opponents of the public interest have gravity on their side.

Now, some people might hear all this gloom and doom and want to give up. They may ask, in the words of Tolkien's King Theoden, "What can men do against such reckless hate?"

Like all worthwhile things, the solution is easier said than done: We have to defy gravity.

But how? How, in this challenging environment, when we are underdogs overwhelmed by titans, when funding and opportunities are being squeezed like never before, when we are constantly asked to do more with less, how are we supposed to defeat what seems like a force of nature?

How do you fly without wings?

For most of us, the answer is: you build them. Today, throughout our profession, public interest lawyers are creating new practice models, hybrids of the traditional and nonprofit approaches. Others are taking advantage of the programs designed to help public interest lawyers pay their loans while still paying the bills.

Many of them struggle. You might have been told it would be easy. If so, you were told wrong.

In spite of the hurdles we face, remember: When your government tries to throw persons with disabilities over the rail, people like us have to catch them and bring them back aboard. When polluters make prevention and cleanup their lowest priority, people like us have to push it back toward the top, right up in their faces. When tyrants, foreign and domestic, trample underfoot the rights of the people they are charged to protect, and then try to sink their crimes deep underground, people like us must dig them up and hold them high for all to see.

So if that means you have to defy gravity, then defy gravity. Your clients and your causes are counting on you.