Mr. and Mrs. Feagle, thank you for the kind introduction. And thank you Dean Levi and Associate Deans Coates and Hoye for giving me this wonderful opportunity to say thank you on behalf of my classmates to our benefactors and friends here today.

My life has been defined by many things. But most of all it has been defined by rooms... rooms and the people who fill them.

The first room I vividly remember is my grandfather’s medical office in Masaya, Nicaragua. I first visited Nicaragua when I was 14 on summer break from school. Each morning, I would walk the three blocks east and the two blocks north with my grandfather to his clinic. We would make that walk every day of the week, including the weekends. When I first walked into his office, I was struck by the number of pictures of the babies he had delivered, the children and families he had treated and the patients he had lost that decorated the walls and his desk. In that room, he had delivered my mother and all four of my uncles, set the broken bones of the town’s mischievous children and mended the war wounds of innumerable civilians during the Sandinista insurgency in the 1970s. At age 85, he continues to make the walk to his clinic—it just takes him a little longer now. He still makes house calls, still sees the same patients and families he did when he first began practicing, and still performs surgeries. I asked him right before I applied to law school why he still continues to work when he could just be living the good life. And he told me that in his mind, he is living the good life because he wakes up every morning to do something that matters and something that he loves, and so he has never had a reason to walk away from it.

I’ve been searching for what that “something” may be for me. After college, that search led me Room 913 on the freshman hallway of Southern Vance High School in rural Henderson, North Carolina. That room was my home during my two years as a Teach For American corps member. On any given day, Room 913 was filled with 111 9th- and 10th-grade students. That room was filled with daily small victories—Kavoris actually raised his hand to answer a question! Emerald sat quietly in her seat all class period taking notes! But it was also filled with many moments when I realized that no matter how many grade levels my students grew in reading or what our passage rate was on the end-of-course state exam, it wouldn’t be enough to stop the abuse many of them faced at home or protect them from the drugs and violence that permeated their lives. Room 913 and the 111 courageous, kind and humbling students that filled it reminds me daily of the obligation I have to engage in the work of improving the lives of people like my students.

With that sense of responsibility I began my two-year fellowship at The Duke Endowment, a private foundation that has been serving the Carolinas since it was first established by James B. Duke in 1924. Throughout those two years, I spent many hours in conference rooms and boardrooms with some of the most thoughtful, ambitious people I have ever met. Daily, my colleagues sought ways to improve access to health care in rural areas, increase the academic excellence of universities like Duke and improve intervention services for at-risk children. It was
their dedication and shared wisdom that helped me take my vision of developing a program that would contribute to solving the inequities that had stood between my students and success and make it into a reality: the Ubuntu Project. For the past two summers, a pilot of the Ubuntu Project, a summer-learning loss program designed to serve rural communities has been running in Statesville, N.C. This past year, each of the 36 children made 7.8 months of reading growth in six weeks. Ubuntu would not have been possible had it not been for the vision and dedication of the staff and trustees that filled the rooms of the Endowment offices with creativity and enthusiasm for a shared vision of helping people and strengthening communities in the Carolinas.

And then there is the room in which I first realized I wanted to come to Duke Law. It was at the Endowment that I was introduced to Duke University and the law school in particular. In the midst of the application cycle, I had the good fortune to hear a presentation Dean Levi made to the Endowment’s trustees. In his presentation, I remember Dean Levi talked about a number of things—new faculty hires, additions to an already-vibrant clinical program and strides the law school had made in making Duke Law a diverse learning environment. But what I remember most is the focus Dean Levi’s presentation had on the school’s students. He showcased students who had gone on to clerk for Supreme Court justices. He highlighted the successful efforts of students in the Wrongful Conviction clinic that had helped exonerate a man that was wrongly convicted in the 70s and in the Appellate Litigation clinic that had won their case on appeal to the Fourth Circuit. He shared about the hundreds of student-led organizations at the law school and the various pieces of student scholarship that had been published in law journals and recognized on a national level.

Dean Levi’s remarks that day made me fall in love with Duke Law. His remarks made it obvious that Duke Law was a well-respected law school with so much to offer his students. But what really stood out to me was that emphasis he placed on the accolades and accomplishments of Duke Law’s students. It wasn’t so much that I knew my peers would be some of the most accomplished and passionate individuals I would ever meet. It was more so his decision to build his presentation around the school’s students and their accomplishments. That told me that Duke is a place where the students come first and where every component of the law school is designed to help each student achieve his or her definition of success.

Since my first day as a summer starter nearly two years ago, Duke has never once failed to exceed my expectations. It truly is a place where everyone from the administrative assistants to the deans to the professors take the time to get to know the students—really get to know them. Not just their professional goals and past accomplishments but who they are as people. But I know that I would have had the privilege to avail myself of this wonderful place were it not for the generosity of the donors to the R. C. Kelly Law Mordecai Law Scholarship and the Douglas A. Poe Mordecai Scholarship for providing me with a Mordecai Scholarship and the opportunity it afforded me to attend Duke Law. Because of your generosity, I am one step closer to doing work that matters in a profession that I love so that, like my grandfather, I will never have reason to walk away.
Here in this room today sit those whose generosity has made Duke the special place that it is. You all have unlocked the door for me and my classmates to walk into Duke’s rooms every day. It is because of all of you that my peers and I have the amazing opportunity to learn the practice of law in a place that encourages us to think creatively, to be enthusiastic, and to transform whatever space we find ourselves in with the lessons we have learned from one another here at Duke. Your kindness and generosity makes Duke Law not only a choice we want to make but a choice we can make. It is because of you that we are able to learn from exceptional professors every day. It is because of you that we have an opportunity to pursue clerkships, to argue cases before circuit courts and work to free the wrongfully convicted through the clinics and to produce student scholarship that explores our intellectual interests. On behalf of all my fellow scholarship and fellowship recipients, thank you. Thank you for what you have done for us and for what you continue to do.

Chantalle Carles
February 28, 2015