

A Letter from Jonas B. Schäfer and Hannah Schulze Zurmussen on behalf of the Association of Law Students of the University of Cologne to Benjamin B. Ferencz

Dear Ben,

We would like to begin by congratulating you on the honorary doctorate recently awarded to you by the faculty of law of the university of cologne. It is more than well-deserved and it was a great pleasure hearing from you through your son Don as well as via your video message.

Now, there is no need to reprise what was expressed in the many great speeches held at the ceremony. Just know, that we unequivocally agree. Allow us, however, to express some thoughts not only from our perspective as a part of our faculty, but more importantly as students, as the younger generation you so often address directly.

Many of us already knew about you from our history lessons in school, from documentaries, your books and of course our classes at university. We could not have been more excited when we learned about the plans for you to be awarded an honorary doctorate and of course we cast our votes unanimously in favour of it.

We would actually go as far as to say that awarding this doctorate is more of an honour for us, now having you connected to our university and faculty. Again, the plethora of reasons we are so proud of this cannot possibly be included here in full. Not least since all of us are impressed by you in our very own ways.

Although, one common factor surely is that often history is just something we read about in books. We learn about the facts, the dates. We talk about the evils and crimes of war, but many of us never fully come to understand what all this actually means. We are young, so perhaps this is excusable. In the end we are lucky enough never to have experienced war.

But witnessing people like you, your passion and strength that despite your impressive age radiate to this day, gives us a chance to comprehend much more than our textbooks would ever allow us to. It gives us an idea of what it took to fight that evil, which makes it so much more tangible. It also instils in us a sense of responsibility to be on the lookout and fight that darkness wherever we see it.

Studying law is indisputably tough. Some of us might be in it for the money, spending nights at the kitchen table, aiming only at securing a well-paying, respectable position in a major law firm. But certainly, most of us do not see it that way. And yet, we ever so often find ourselves at that table, buried in our textbooks, wondering why – if not for the money – we are doing this to ourselves. Being sleepless at night and stressed out at day.

The answer to that we find in you, Ben. It is the notion that law is a powerful tool in the hands of the right people. That it can certainly be more than just setting up contracts for money, that it might even be a way to create peace and find real justice and reconciliation. This is what keeps us going because it gives us a much-needed sense of direction and shows us what kind of lawyers we want to be one day.

You are a great role model to many of us. And while few, likely none of us, will achieve what you have achieved, we all try to carry that torch you gave us as best as we can. With all these sparks carrying your vision of law and world peace into the future, we will surely be able to keep the fire you lit burning bright and hopefully ignite new flames of our own.

Now all that is left for us to do, is to thank you in the name of all students and especially in the name of the student body at the University of Cologne. Thank you for your work, for what you have achieved for world history and for international law.

But most of all, thank you for being our role model. We wish you all the best.



