

Joseph R. Biden Jr
Class of 1968

Professor Emeritus Thomas Maroney recalled teaching his former student Joseph R. Biden Jr in his third-year legislation course, and commented, “I had the impression that this student was a young man who was going to do well and go a long way.” Little could he or, perhaps, anyone else have predicted the lengths and heights to which Biden would travel, from law school, to law practice, to state government, to 35 years as a United States Senator representing the State of Delaware, and to two terms as Vice President of the United States of America—the highest federal office ever held by any graduate of Syracuse University.

Born in Scranton, PA, in 1942, to a family of modest means, Biden was an above-average student, an accomplished secondary school athlete, and a recognized leader of his high school peers. He graduated from the University of Delaware in 1965 with a double major in history and political science. Having married Neilia Hunter, an Auburn, NY native and Syracuse University alumna, Biden matriculated at our College of Law, where, as he described it, “did not graduate in the top half of the class.”

But statistics often prove not to be the predictor of one’s abilities or prospects. And, indeed, it was after leaving Syracuse that his life and career took off. From Delaware private practitioner, to public defender and later county legislator, and then to one of the youngest candidates ever elected to the United States Senate.

Acknowledged by the media early in his first term as a “Senator to be watched,” he ultimately rose to chair the Judiciary Committee and later the Foreign Relations Committee, earning praise as an effective legislator, constituent representative, bipartisan consensus builder, and expert on criminal law, criminal justice, and foreign policy, just to name a few. As Vice President for two full terms under President Barack Obama, Biden served with further distinction as the President’s right-hand man, a full partner in the leadership of our nation. Upon the end of his term, President Obama bestowed Vice President Biden with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor.

But these laudable public accomplishments are not the only reasons for honoring Biden. He has keen senses of compassion, dignity, and insightfulness into people that are second to none. His nominator describes him as “a figure whose reputation precedes him, as an all-around good guy, public servant, and man of compassion and inspiration who succeeded on the world stage, where those personal qualities were even more sharply tested in the crucible of personal adversity,” including the passing of his son, Beau, a member of our law school’s Class of 1994, a decorated Army National Guard officer who voluntarily served in Iraq, and Attorney General of the State of Delaware.

Biden now channels his energies at the Biden Foundation with the mission of identifying policies to advance the middle class, decrease economic inequality, increase opportunity for all people, and ensure that everyone—no matter their income level, race, gender, age, or sexual orientation—is treated equally and gets a fair shot at achieving the American Dream. And, as founder of the Biden Cancer Initiative, he builds on the job he began while Vice President: to cure cancer.

Through it all, he always remembers his roots at the College of Law, returning many times, including a record four appearances as the law school’s principal commencement speaker. With the range of his experiences, Biden always finds a way to impart a message of hope and anticipation for the future. The last paragraph of his book, *Promise Me, Dad*, captures his spirit:

So how do I want to spend the rest of my life? I want to spend as much time as I can with my family, and I want to help change the country and the world for the better. That duty does much more than give me purpose; it gives me something to hope for. It makes me nostalgic for the future.

Biden’s hope and optimism make us proud to be part of his journey, especially on this fiftieth anniversary of his graduation.

*In recognition of his distinguished career in public service, and his remarkable compassion and dignity,
Syracuse University College of Law is proud to honor*

Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr.
with the Syracuse Law Honors Medal.