Historic Women in Legal Education: A Celebration in Honor of the First Women at Washington University paid tribute to the School of Law’s first tenured women professors and women who had graduated 50 or more years ago. The Women’s Law Caucus (WLC) organized the March 4, 2004, celebration in conjunction with its fifth annual International Women’s Day event and Washington University’s sesquicentennial anniversary.

The celebration not only marked current progress, but also hailed a time when St. Louis was both frontier and gateway, a time when the School’s first women students were true legal pioneers. At the forefront of a changing profession, the School opened its doors as early as 1869 to two highly successful students, Lemma Barkeloo and Phoebe Couzins. Barkeloo became Missouri’s first woman lawyer and the second woman licensed in the United States. Couzins, LLB 1871, was Washington University’s first woman graduate and the second woman lawyer licensed in Missouri.

Karen L. Tokarz, professor of law and director of the Clinical Education and Alternative Dispute Resolution Programs, notes that the tradition of supporting women students and now women faculty remains strong.

“Washington University’s commitment to the advancement of women continues today,” she says. “In 2004 17 women, or nearly 43 percent, of the School of Law’s 40 tenure-track professors are women; this percentage is among the highest in the country. And nearly half of our law students are women.”

Lucile Wiley Ring, JD ’46, who flew in for the celebration from Selah, Washington, says, “I was very impressed with the women who organized the celebration. They were intelligent, wholesome, helpful, and efficient. The experience was outstanding.”

Comparing her experiences with those of today’s students, Ring says, “When I first arrived in St. Louis in 1944, I had never in my life seen a woman lawyer. During my years in law school, there was not a single woman on the law faculty. Now women are full professors!”

“The celebration was one of the nicest events I have ever attended,” says Charlotte Anschuetz Bleistein, AB ’36, JD ’39. “I had a student guide and attended class. The women were wonderful to us.”

Bleistein and Ring exemplify the strong will and high spirits of early women law students, observes Lauren Dickie, 2003–04 WLC president: “They paved the way for us.”

Bleistein is the granddaughter of Milwaukee attorney and labor activist Richard Elsner, who was Wisconsin’s first socialist civil judge. She says she “always wanted to get into labor law.” After graduation she headed for Washington, D.C., finally finding work as a review attorney with the National Labor Relations Board. She later served as a field examiner in Detroit, where she was completely unfazed by employers “furious about the government nosing into their business and even more furious about being sent a woman!”

Several years later Bleistein practiced law in the Milwaukee area, where she found fair treatment in the spittoon-filled courts, but few women attorneys. In the government-built village of Greendale, where she settled, the Eisenhower administration mandated that its residents either buy the properties they were renting or move. So Bleistein launched an evolving practice representing her neighbors. Nearly all the residents were about the same age and

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“had the same problems at the same time. First, they had insurance problems. Then came income tax problems, problems with their children in the ’60s, divorces, and then problems with their aging parents.” Today many of these clients are in nursing homes, and Bleistein continues to help them: “Half the time I don’t charge them. They’re my friends.”

For Ring, the School of Law’s celebration was “an inspiring experience that brought back powerful memories.” The child of Nebraska pioneers, Ring was an intrepid student whom the Women’s Bar Association of St. Louis, led by three alumnae, quickly adopted. Her schedule was demanding: She began studying at 4 a.m. before taking the streetcar from her apartment on Waterman. After class she went either to a University job (assisting the law registrar or Chancellor Arthur Holly Compton’s office) or to another part-time job downtown. “Then I’d take the streetcar back, have a light dinner, and go to the law library until it closed at 11.”

She practiced law for more than 50 years and wrote numerous court directories. As one of three nominees for the Missouri Court of Appeals, Ring became the first woman nominated for a judgeship under the Non-Partisan Court Plan. Her book, Breaking the Barriers: The St. Louis Legacy of Women in Law, 1869-1969, includes chapters such as “They Didn’t Put My Name on the Door.”

R emarking on the celebration, Dickie says, “One of the most important insights for me was how many of our alumnae had stayed in touch with one another over time. I look forward to knowing all my Law Caucus friends for 50 or 60 years!”

Because this year’s celebration succeeded in making the historical connection between alumnae and students—with several alumnae and students even becoming pen pals—plans are under way for the 2005 celebration to again welcome past alumnae.

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Thiry-two early law school alumnae who led the way into the study and practice of law were honored March 4, 2004, at the special International Women’s Day celebration. Honored in person were (standing, from the left) Bette Meyer Buffa, LLB ’46; Barbara Goldberg Kurtz, JD ’43; Juanita Seibert McKee, JD ’46; Lucile Wiley Ring, JD ’46; and (seated, from the left) Charlotte Anschuetz Bleistein, AB ’36, JD ’39; Dorothy Dean Ziern, LLB ’39; Ursel D. Boyd, JD ’54; and Edith Jenkin Spink, LLB ’45, AB ’46. The remaining 24 alumnae, who were unable to attend the celebration, were listed in the program.

Also honored were the School’s first tenured women faculty members: Susan Frelisch Appleton, the Lemma Barkeloo & Phoebe Cousins Professor of Law; Kathleen F. Brickey, the James Carr Professor of Criminal Jurisprudence; and Professor Karen L. Tokarz, director of the Clinical Education and Alternative Dispute Resolution Programs.

As the 2004 guest speaker for the celebration, Herma Hill Kay, the Barbara Nachtrieb Armstrong Professor of Law and former law dean at the University of California at Berkeley, discussed her ongoing research on early women law professors.