A new fund to support law students interested in public service also pays homage to David Becker, who has influenced students and colleagues at the School of Law for 40 years.

The announcement of the creation of the David M. Becker Public Service Fund in honor of the professor’s four decades of teaching was the highlight of Washington University School of Law’s annual Scholars in Law dinner on November 6, 2002.

Becker, the School of Law’s associate dean for external relations and the Joseph H. Zumbalen Professor of the Law of Property, was genuinely surprised to be called to the dais at the Ritz-Carlton St. Louis by Joel Seligman, dean and the Ethan A.H. Shepley University Professor.

“For 40 years, David Becker’s teaching has personified his great confidence in students,” Seligman said that evening. “He is a friend to so many alumni and a colleague to those who’ve had the privilege to serve with him. In our travels to visit alumni, I’ve seen his concern for his former students. You are persons whose progress he values and cherishes.”

In his address, Seligman said the David M. Becker Public Service Fund was created “to celebrate the extraordinary influence that David has had on both students and colleagues.”

This fund will provide an annual contribution to the School of Law’s Public Interest Summer Stipend Program. Becker has long supported this program, which enables students to work in summer internships in public service by covering basic living expenses. With a goal of $1 million, Seligman announced that $560,000 already had been raised as of November 6, 2002, to support the fund. Since then, the fund total has increased to $690,000 as of March 12, 2003.

“I couldn’t feel more blessed by the significance of this fund and the purpose for which it will be used,” said Becker that evening.

Charles Newman, JD ’73, a partner at Bryan Cave LLP in St. Louis, approached Seligman with the idea of creating the David M. Becker Public Service Fund in the spring of 2002, after he learned that Becker was approaching 40 continuous years of teaching—with no leaves of absence—at the School of Law.

“That is a remarkable record, and he is a remarkable person,” Newman says. “He has affected more students in more ways than any academic I know. Key characteristics of David are his compassion and empathy. He cares deeply about everyone he interacts with both inside and outside of the classroom. David truly is a friend to all and a foe to none.”

Newman suggested that this special tribute fund support the Public Interest Summer Stipend Program because “scholarships in public service are par-
particularly dear to David,” he says. “It’s a measure of him as a person.”

Through the program, students are able to work throughout the country and the world on important projects in the public service arena, according to Mary Zabriskie, associate director of public service advising and a former public service lawyer. Students have represented indigents on Missouri’s death row, developed policies for children’s access to AIDS treatments in South Africa, provided outreach services to San Francisco’s disabled community, worked for United States attorneys and the Federal Bureau of Investigation on federal prosecutions, and assisted Securities and Exchange Commission officials with legal issues related to the stock market.

“Students who participate in this program often return to law school in the fall energized and enthused about their studies,” says Zabriskie. “For many, the summer experience convinces them that they belong in public service law. Others decide to follow a path into private practice. But even those who eventually head to large law firms do so with an awareness of the chance to effect change through pro bono work.”

Becker credits his dual interest in financial assistance and public service to the upbringing provided by his late parents, Benjamin M. and Jean Merin Becker, for whom he and his wife, Sandi, have established a memorial scholarship at the School of Law.

“My father and mother were adults during the Depression,” says Becker. “They worked very hard. My father held two jobs in school and was given financial aid in law school. Many years later, I often asked him why he was helping someone get through school or serving a client for little or no fee. His response was ‘because that person needs an opportunity for success.’ That’s how my father conducted himself as a lawyer.”

Becker worked for his father’s Chicago law firm, Becker & Savin, after graduating with honors from Harvard College and the University of Chicago’s law school. He accepted a one-year teaching post at the University of Michigan at the suggestion of his wife, also a teacher. He loved the experience so much that he knew he’d never return to practicing law. Becker joined Washington University in 1963.

“I learn more from my students than they do from me,” he says. “The last 40 years have been filled with constant learning and excitement.”


While Becker teaches upper-level courses, he also remains committed to teaching Property to first-year law students: “These students are very open and extremely serious. I’m able to get through to people and have a lasting impact on how they go about problem solving. They are so enthusiastic that I’m never bored.”

Becker neglects to mention that these students often are terrified—of him. He is a master of the Socratic method, and just about every law graduate has a story to tell of his or her time in Property.

“David really helped his students to become critical thinkers,” says Alan Bornstein, JD ’81, a partner at Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal in St. Louis and a supporter of the David M. Becker Public Service Fund.

Bornstein regularly lunches with his former professor. “Each time, I experience that same fear that I had in the classroom just by his mere presence,” says Bornstein. “Then I realize that we’re just having lunch. There won’t be any Socratic presentations involved.”

In 1972 David Becker was teaching in Mudd Hall.