Professor Karen Tokarz’s commitment to social justice infuses her teaching, her direction of the School of Law’s clinical programs, and her life.

To give voice to the voiceless, to take up the cause of those whom society so often ignores, to put institutions to work on their behalf—these are the unmistakable themes of Karen Tokarz’s life.

“My focus,” she says simply, “is on social justice and civil rights.”

It was an interest sharpened as a child in Birmingham, Alabama. “My mother was the supervising nurse for the indigent floor of the University of Alabama hospital,” she explains. “That’s how I learned about civil rights.”

Unlike many whites in the South, Tokarz grew up knowing people in diverse ethnic groups, many of them her mother’s co-workers. Her Catholic school was the first high school in Birmingham to integrate. She drove to school every morning past the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, site of an infamous racist bombing.

Tokarz earned her bachelor’s degree at Webster University and then went to work at the St. Louis City Juvenile Court. There she began what has been a decades-long friendship with Judge Theodore McMillian, now on the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals. With his assistance, she received a full scholarship to Saint Louis University, where she taught part-time after graduation. She then joined the Washington University faculty in 1979. In 1985, Tokarz focused on discrimination law as she earned a graduate law degree from the University of California—Berkeley.

Her commitment to civil rights has infused her teaching. “I want my students to understand the power of law and justice, and the difference between the two,” asserts Tokarz, professor of law and director of clinical education. “It’s more than understanding the letter of the law; it’s understanding the realities of justice and injustice. I want my students to understand their professional responsibility to provide access to justice for all.”

Third-year law student T.J. Hill understands: “She makes you realize that the law is far-reaching and encompasses so many aspects of our society. It’s incredible to me how politically involved she is in a way that underscores civic responsibility. She’s always encouraging us to get involved in the community, to join our neighborhood association, to mentor a high school kid—to become a ’lawyer as citizen.’ ”

Asha Ramgobin, a leading civil rights activist and clinical law professor at the University of Natal in Durban, South Africa, says that Tokarz is effective as a teacher because she seeks “to live the lessons” she teaches. “Karen’s approach to the law as a tool for social justice and not as an end in itself is her greatest strength, one she imparts through teaching and modeling.”

Tokarz never flags in impressing this lesson. In 2000 she launched an annual conference on “Access to Equal Justice,” bringing together approximately 200 faculty, students, lawyers, judges, and community leaders.

With Susan Appleton, the Lemma Barkeloo & Phoebe Couzins Professor of Law and associate dean of faculty, Tokarz coordinates the annual Public Interest Law Speakers Series, which strives to showcase renowned public service practitioners and scholars, and to stress civic responsibility to aspiring lawyers. Since 1998, distinguished scholars and advocates have addressed issues ranging from international human rights to poverty to capital punishment to environmental justice.

“The series encompasses a lot of my teaching goals,” Tokarz says. “It highlights the need for civic engagement and leadership; it illuminates the pro bono, public service responsibility of law students and lawyers; and it engages the wider University community in interdisciplinary discussions about justice and public policy.”

But it is in the School’s top-ranked law clinics that Tokarz’s passion for
equal justice has found its most enduring expression. In the clinics, law students learn real-world skills in providing supervised representation for clients in cases ranging from family violence to environmental racism to employment discrimination to criminal justice.

“She has been instrumental in mainstreaming clinical legal education,” Ramgobin says. “Karen continues to seek more effective methods to ensure that legal education is transformed to meet the needs of those it was designed to protect—the vulnerable groups in society.”

Audrey Fleissig, JD ’80, the first woman United States attorney in Missouri’s Eastern District and now a United States magistrate judge in the Eastern District, agrees: “Karen has been an incredible advocate for clinical education and has worked tirelessly to assure that Washington University has the finest clinical education program in the country. This, in turn, has helped countless students find real meaning in their legal education.”

Encouragement is a recurring theme in conversations with Tokarz’s students and colleagues. Hill, for example, arrived at law school with an interest in disability rights. “Karen has been one of the most positive and important influences in my law school career, encouraging me to pursue my interest in disability law,” he says. “She convinced me that the dreams I have are valid and worthy of my work.”

Her expertise in clinical education—directing the Washington University School of Law’s program since 1980—has led to increasing projects abroad, in which she works with law teachers and lawyers in developing countries to expand and improve legal education and the delivery of legal services.

She worked with Catholic University law school clinical faculty in 1996 to initiate clinical education in Poland. She spent the fall 2001 semester with the University of Natal Campus Law Clinic in Durban, South Africa. Tokarz served on the faculty of the Global Alliance for Justice Education’s first world conference in Trivandrum, India, in 1999; the second world conference in Durban, South Africa, in 2001; and the Asia-Pacific regional conference in Sydney, Australia, in 2002.

“With an emerging democracy,” she explains, “there comes a new view of the rule of law, a new view of the rights to representation. There is a need for clinical education to train law students to practice, and there is almost always a new development of civil rights law.”

Tokarz says her work abroad has improved her understanding of justice issues and given her a more thoroughly global perspective that she now shares with her students.

In addition, her South Africa experience helped illuminate another subject that she teaches with passion—dispute resolution and mediation. In its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, she muses, “South Africa makes the point most poignantly, that you can transverse or evolve from a period as repugnant as apartheid toward a commitment to a nonracial society. The philosophy of restorative justice is the predicate to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and it’s the same philosophy in the victim-offender mediations we’re doing at the Juvenile Court,” she says of students in her Civil Rights and Community Justice Clinic, who mediate between first-offense juveniles and their victims. The program cuts the recidivism rate among young offenders in half.

“I really do think people are ultimately interested in resolving conflict,” says Tokarz. “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a template for the strength of human character and human commitment to community.”