An engineer who likes to work with people, Beth Martin always has been dedicated to community service. Having served as a camp counselor, tutored children, and repaired houses in rundown neighborhoods, she now co-directs the School of Law’s Interdisciplinary Environmental Clinic.

“Now one else in the country has a job like mine,” says Martin. Unique among law schools, this clinic brings together law students with students from other academic areas to aid nonprofit and community groups with environmental problems.

After earning undergraduate degrees in math and civil engineering and then a master’s in environmental engineering, Martin worked for an environmental consulting firm that gave her a close-up view of communities threatened by contamination. Governments and corporations had plenty of lawyers, engineers, and scientists on staff, but where were the small community groups to turn?

While pondering this question, she learned that Maxine I. Lipeles, senior lecturer at the School of Law, was launching the IEC. Martin didn’t hesitate. “We had coffee, and I asked if she wanted to hire me.”

Lipeles and Martin now supervise 16 Washington University students. Half of these students are from the law school, while half are from other academic areas—primarily engineering and environmental studies, but also business, social work, and medicine. Through interdisciplinary teams, the students advise clients, help them handle correspondence with the government and businesses, attend public meetings with clients, and accompany them to court.

“We tell students that this isn’t a course in which you can settle for average work. It’s a real client in a real case. The work has to be the best you can do,” Beth Martin and respond,” Martin says.

Currently the IEC is working with neighborhood activists on the problem of lead-based paint in St. Louis houses. “The system doesn’t kick in until a child is poisoned,” Martin says. “Our team is working with our client to find ways to proactively make housing stock lead-safe.”

Because of the IEC, some students are inspired to pursue environmental law. Others gain experience in big-case litigation that they apply to various areas of practice. Additionally those aspiring lawyers, scientists, and engineers gain the invaluable experience of collaborating with those in other fields to best serve the client.

Also benefiting from the IEC, says Martin, are the people being represented. “We provide a valuable service to the community that would not otherwise be available.”

For more information on the Interdisciplinary Environmental Clinic, visit http://law.wustl.edu/Clinics/Intenv/index.html.