Resolved to Make a Difference

For many years, Professor Karen Tokarz was the chief architect of the highly ranked Clinical Education Program at the law school. Now as director of the school’s Dispute Resolution Program, Tokarz continues to stress to students the professional responsibilities of lawyers to both their clients and society.

By Judy H. Watts

Around the world, across the nation — and notably at the Washington University School of Law — the practice and teaching of law are changing. “It’s a transformation!” says Karen L. Tokarz, with her radiant grin. “There’s a new kind of lawyer and a new role for lawyers,” explains Tokarz, JD, LLM, the Charles Nagel Professor of Public Interest Law and Public Service. “The 21st-century lawyer more often solves clients’ problems through ‘alternative dispute resolution’ — negotiation, mediation, arbitration and public dialogue — rather than through trials. Our goal is to prepare lawyers who are client-centered, zealous and passionate, but also focused on solving disputes creatively, efficiently and fairly — and in ways that preserve relationships as much as possible.”

And, it seems that many in society view this new professional role for lawyers and new direction in legal education as positive. Chancellor Emeritus William H. Danforth recently remarked: “I am especially taken with new ways that the law can be applied to reach compromises and make the world work better. I know some, of course, who have naturally pursued this course, but it is good to have it taught.”
Assuring access to legal representation

Tokarz, who also coordinates the Public Interest Law & Policy Speaker Series, is among the law school’s nationally known faculty who teach in the Clinical Education Program. Over the years, she helped establish the school as a global leader in clinical legal education. The program consistently ranks in the top five in the nation. Through 12 national and international clinics and field placement programs — nine in St. Louis; one in Washington, D.C.; one in Delaware; and one that provides overseas placements — faculty-supervised law school work on behalf of low-income clients, nonprofits, government offices and the courts.

Tokarz, who also coordinates the Public Interest Law & Policy Speaker Series, is among the law school’s nationally known faculty who teach in the Clinical Education Program. In her course, “Civil Rights & Community Justice Clinic,” she and her clinic students collaborate with Legal Services of Eastern Missouri and other agencies in St. Louis on public health benefits, housing and immigration cases. She also coordinates the school’s new “International Justice & Conflict Resolution Field Placement” in partnership with international human rights authority Leila Nadya Sadat, the Henry H. Field Placement in partnership with international housing and immigration cases. She also coordinates the nationally known faculty who teach in the Clinical Law & Policy Speaker Series, is among the law school’s work on behalf of low-income clients, nonprofits, government offices and the courts.

Dispute resolution’s impact grows

Now, following a yearlong sabbatical spent as a visiting scholar at the Harvard Law School Program on Negotiation, Tokarz is embracing a new challenge: directing the law school’s Dispute Resolution Program and guiding it, too, to national pre-eminence. “And Karen will do it!” Syverud says.

Dispute resolution is an essential tool for today’s new lawyers. The school’s dispute resolution curriculum is already robust and growing. Tokarz adds that she will contribute to business negotiation, family mediation, arbitration, pre-trial settlement, and game theory, as well as domestic and international internships. New faculty in the area include Rebecca Hollander-Blumoff, associate professor of law, who teaches law and psychology and advanced negotiation. Tokarz brings to her directorship all the expertise and energy cultivated from her extensive accomplishments and service. Among them, she is a founding member of the Global Alliance for Justice Education and a leader in major professional and civil justice organizations.

In fall 2001, Tokarz went to South Africa as a School of Law Treiman Fellow; in summer 2008, she returned as a Fulbright Senior Specialist. Over the years, she has worked with the University of Kwa Zulu-Natal, in Durban, helping to foster clinical education and dispute resolution programs, a law student-exchange program and summer internships there for WUSTL law students.

To date, more than 100 students have studied or worked with public-interest law offices in Africa.

While a student, Naomi Warren (photo, at left), JD ’08, MSW ’08, took Tokarz’s “Civil Rights & Community Justice Clinic” and also spent a semester at the University of Kwa Zulu-Natal law school, where she interned with the Children’s Rights Centre under the supervision of Tokarz.

It couldn’t happen in a courtroom

Tokarz says she chose to work in South Africa almost a decade ago in large part because South Africa’s movement from apartheid to full democracy — without open civil war and with a national commitment to a non-racialized society — attests to what “alternative dispute resolution” can do.

The New Lawyer: Preparing to Serve

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ean Syverud says Professor Tokarz has changed the Washington University School of Law and legal education around the world. “She has taught generations of students through hands-on learning how to provide access to justice,” Syverud says, “and many of those students have gone on to have path-breaking careers of their own in public service.” Here are snapshots of two third-year students influenced by Tokarz and well positioned to make a difference.

Sedona Thevarajah interned this past semester in the White House office of Valerie Jarrett, senior advisor and assistant to the president for intergovernmental affairs and public engagement, through the school’s D.C. clinic. She plans a career working with both communities and providers on reform “to change health-care access issues and health-care disparities resulting from systematic discrimination.” Earlier in her career, she interned for BJC HealthCare and worked on Medicaid appeals for children through Tokarz’s “Civil Rights & Community Justice Clinic.” In 2009, her team placed second in the American Bar Association “Representation in Mediation” national competition. She calls Tokarz “an amazing teacher and role model — the kind of community-focused, public interest lawyer I want to be!”

Joe Whitfield studied negotiation with Dean Syverud, then interned with Lawyers for Human Rights in Durban, South Africa, counseling and negotiating on behalf of refugees and immigrants, through Tokarz’s summer program. He studied dispute resolution in Hong Kong during the fall of his third year and, under Tokarz’s guidance, he researched the potential for using public dispute resolution with regard to land disputes in the region. “These experiences have convinced me that dispute resolution is a fundamental lawyering skill,” says Whitfield, who looks forward to a career as an international public policy negotiator. “And I’m blessed to know Professor Tokarz!”