Tokarz Awarded Public Service Professorship

RECENTLY NAMED TO THE UNIVERSITY’S FIRST ENDOwed PROFESSORSHIP IN PUBLIC SERVICE, Professor Karen Tokarz has had a lifelong commitment to public interest law and public service.

“If we law faculty do our job, our students learn that lawyering is a profession that, when truest to its core, couples intellect with compassion, conviction with civility, and advocacy with integrity,” Tokarz says. “They also learn that great lawyering requires civic engagement and public service.”

Tokarz was installed as the Charles Nagel Professor of Public Interest Law and Public Service on April 1, 2008. In her new position, she will continue to teach the Civil Rights & Community Justice Clinic and dispute resolution courses, coordinate the school’s Public Interest Law & Policy Speakers Series, and serve as a faculty advisor for the Journal of Law & Policy. She will focus her energies on building the law school’s Alternative Dispute Resolution Program and Africa Public Interest Law & Public Service Initiative.

“I would like to congratulate Karen as the inaugural holder of this new public service chair and for her more than 25 years of directing our school’s award-winning Clinical Education Program,” Kent Syverud, dean and the Ethan A.H. Shepley University Professor, said at the inauguration ceremony. “Karen has inspired countless students and colleagues through her teaching; her activism; her scholarship; her generosity in assisting others; and her unique ability to build institutions and coalitions within the law school, the University, and the community.”

Through her teaching, scholarship, and civic involvement, Tokarz has worked to expose law students to the challenges and rewards of representing clients and to the responsibilities of lawyers to address injustice in society.

“In clinical courses, law students see firsthand the impact they can have on people’s lives and come to understand the power of the law and the privilege of lawyering,” Tokarz explains. “They begin to see the many ways they can contribute to society.”

For more than two decades, Tokarz was the director of the law school’s Clinical Education Program, which provides law students with opportunities to learn professional skills and values—working in the real world with low-income clients, nonprofits, public interest attorneys, judges, and legislators. During her tenure as director, she helped grow the faculty and curriculum in the Clinical Education Program, propel the program to top 10 national rankings, and establish the law school as a global leader in clinical legal education.

While on sabbatical in 2008–09, Tokarz will be serving as a visiting scholar at the Harvard Law School Program on Negotiation and as a Fulbright Senior Specialist for South Africa.

In the Fulbright position, she will visit the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in Durban, South Africa, to assist in the development of their dispute resolution master’s program. Tokarz’s work with the Fulbright program is the continuation of close cooperation with the UKZN law faculty. She spent a semester consulting with their Clinical Program in 2001.

“South Africa is a wonderfully rich environment for law students to study an emerging democracy and an emerging economy,” Tokarz says. “They see constitutional law development at a nascent stage and learn to compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of another legal system with our own.”

Several years ago, Tokarz initiated an exchange program for law students between Washington University and UKZN, which to date has involved seven law students studying at UKZN and two UKZN law students studying here, all under the close supervision of experienced and expert faculty.

Each summer since 2002, she has coordinated 10-week internships for a team of six to eight law students with the Legal Aid Board of South Africa and other public interest law offices in South Africa.

Tokarz’s public service professorship was made possible through the estate of Daniel Noyes Kirby, LLB 1888. He was a member of the Washington University Corporation (the predecessor to the Board of Trustees), lecturer in the University’s Law Department (the predecessor to the law school), and a prominent St. Louis lawyer during his 57 years in practice. The professorship is named for Kirby’s law partner, Charles Nagel, LLB 1872. Nagel was a member of Washington University’s Board of Directors and part-time lecturer on constitutional law and medical jurisprudence.

Dean Kent Syverud, left, and Chancellor Mark Wrighton congratulate Karen Tokarz on her new professorship.

by Sam Guzik