ROFESSOR MARION G. CRAIN firmly believes in the importance of work in our culture, as well as in the fundamental influences of law, politics, and economics on the work experience. At her chair installation as the Wiley B. Rutledge Professor of Law on March 30, 2009, she delivered an address on “Work Matters.”

“Work lies at the core of the American dream,” noted Crain, an expert in labor and employment law. “Our cultural belief is that if you are willing to work hard, your family will be secure. Work is also the means for achieving a social and economic condition that is better than that of your parents, and to ensure, hopefully, that your children have a better life and more opportunities than you had. That is what we believe about work in this culture. Of course, work can also be a burden. In the famous words of Studs Terkel ... work can be a ‘Monday through Friday sort of dying, a violence to the spirit, as well as to the body.’ Not for everyone, but for some cadre of persons.”

Crain focused on the law that ordinary citizens encounter at work and the many definitions of work. She examined the positive sides of waged work and its associated benefits, including economic self-sufficiency, health insurance, retirement plans, security, dignity, standing, belonging, membership in the social structure, and participation in democracy.

“Work is more than a market transaction of labor for dollars,” she said. “It is how we create and perform our identities in the world—how we assert our membership in the larger communities to which we belong: economic, cultural, and political.”

Additionally, Crain quoted her students’ views on work, discussed the impacts of unemployment, and noted the “fundamental disconnect” between the law and employees’ notions of work. She criticized the “at will” rule in employment and called for a Constitutional right to work; the implementation of work-spreading measures when the economy falters; and better notice periods, severance pay, retraining, and transitional assistance.

Crain’s endowed professorship is named for Rutledge, who served as the law school’s dean and a U.S. Supreme Court Justice. Before his deanship from 1931 to 1935, he was a beloved law professor. As a former student remembered years later, Rutledge made everyone in his classes understand that the “law’s ultimate goal is to produce fairness instead of advantage in its application.”

Kent Syverud, dean and the Ethan A.H. Shepley University Professor, said many parallels exist between Rutledge and Crain. He referred to Rutledge’s authoritative biography, by John Ferren, titled: Salt of the Earth, Conscience of the Court, and observed:

“Marion Crain’s scholarship and teaching is animated by a passion for justice, rigor in analysis, and a healthy seasoning of the down-to-earth knowledge of how real people work and live.”

Before entering teaching, Crain clerked for Judge Arthur L. Alarcon of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. During the chair installation, Alarcon gave opening remarks, referring to Crain’s talents as a law clerk and her now national reputation as an expert in her field.

Crain’s scholarship examines the relationships among gender, work, and class status, with a particular emphasis on collective action. She is the co-author of two textbooks, Labor Law: Cases and Materials and Work Law: Cases and Materials, and is the co-editor, with Sen. John Edwards, and Arne Kalleberg, the Kenan Distinguished Professor at the University of North Carolina (UNC), of Ending Poverty in America: How to Restore the American Dream.

As part of her commitment to legal education, Crain serves on the executive committee of the Labor Law Group, an international collective of law professors dedicated to advancing pedagogy and scholarship on labor and employment law. She also is a past chair of the Association of American Law Schools Section on Labor and Employment Law. Crain serves on the editorial board of the Employee Rights and Employment Policy Journal, a peer-reviewed journal focusing on labor and employment law.

A dedicated teacher, Crain was selected by the student body as the David M. Becker Professor of the Year in 2009, following her first year on the faculty here. Formerly the director of UNC’s Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity, she will become the director of Washington University Law’s Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in January 2010.