Jennifer Schwesig, JD ’98, decided against offers in the international law meccas of New York and Washington, D.C., instead opting to return to St. Louis where she has found a host of corporate clients with abundant international law needs. Schwesig, who now directs Armstrong Teasdale’s International Law Group in St. Louis and Shanghai, China, is nationally recognized as a rising star in her chosen field.
Jennifer Schwesig traces her interest in international law back to high school when she became fascinated with history and philosophy, as well as current events in South Africa. Apartheid was a major issue, she recalls, and Nelson Mandela was a personal hero. “I realized that the law created apartheid, and that lawyers could overturn those laws,” she says. “There’s a lot of power and influence in that.”

These interests, plus positive experiences abroad and a curiosity about people and cultures, contributed to her drive to practice law as it applies in other countries. Along the way, she earned her undergraduate degree in history from Kenyon College and then headed to law school at Washington University, where she “took every international class offered.”

Professors Peter Mutharika and Leila Nadya Sadat stand out as inspirations. “They were great teachers,” she says. “Peter is now a member of the parliament and cabinet in Malawi. Leila was simply fabulous, and her work on the International Criminal Court and crimes against humanity is fascinating.”

Although the road to Schwesig’s current position as head of Armstrong Teasdale’s International Law Group has not been entirely linear, she says the varying experiences she gained helped lay the groundwork for success in her current area of practice.

Schwesig’s first job out of law school was with the small St. Louis firm of Copeland, Thompson and Farris, where she practiced bankruptcy and restructuring, as well as associated commercial litigation. Her three years there gave her a thorough knowledge of U.S. domestic law and provided her with a valuable professional network.

She then decided to refocus on international law, and in August 2001, she enrolled in the LLM Program in International and Comparative Law at Georgetown University. However, her relocation to the nation’s capital was anything but smooth. During her first two weeks in the D.C. area, she was held up at gunpoint. That was followed by the horror of 9/11. Then, after she moved to a “safer” area, her neighborhood post office was one of those found to harbor anthrax.

“I wasn’t going to be deterred,” she recalls. “I’m proud of the fact that I stuck with it in a frightening environment. I took a risk, but it paid off extraordinarily. I think that you don’t have to follow just one well-worn path to success as long as you don’t lose sight of your goal.”

When it came time to practice international law, she decided to forgo offers in New York and Washington, D.C., instead returning to her hometown of St. Louis where opportunities in international business transactions were beginning to take off. (She and her husband, Kevin Mellick, also an attorney, enjoy the added ease of living in nearby University City.)

The notion of a “global economy” was really picking up steam, she recalls. “I saw a tremendous opportunity in St. Louis for business people who wanted to walk in and meet face to face with someone on international policy and issues.”

Through networking and drawing on her reputation as a bankruptcy lawyer in St. Louis, Schwesig convinced Armstrong Teasdale to give her some contract work. Four months later, in January 2003, they hired her to join the firm’s small, but growing international practice group.

Today, Schwesig is practice group leader of an expanding group of 10 international lawyers, having been named a partner in 2007. She is the firm’s youngest practice group leader and the only woman practice group leader of six groups. Additionally, she directs the firm’s Shanghai, China, office, which is part of the China Alliance. The alliance is a partnership among Armstrong Teasdale and several other international law firms, seeking a China presence in a country with bountiful, economical labor and an exploding middle class. Her current goal is to expand the firm’s international practice in both St. Louis and China.

Schwesig was recognized by the St. Louis Business Journal as one of St. Louis’s 40 Under 40, Class of 2008. She chaired the International Committee of the Missouri Bar for three years and is a member of the ABA International Section and American Society of International Law. In 2009 she was named a Law360 Rising Legal Star in recognition of achievements that catapulted her to the top of the legal profession at a young age.

Her experience in international corporate law combines corporate formation, entity selection, structure, mergers, acquisitions and divestures, cross-border investments, joint ventures, regulations and compliance, strategic business alliances, and international franchising. Schwesig also works to ensure that each arrangement follows procedure and local laws, complies with export controls, minimizes her client’s tax implications and risk, and fulfills the organization’s goals.

Recent clients have included a commercial and military aircraft parts manufacturer, a leading developer of animal health and nutrition programs, the largest franchisor of global real estate brokerage offices, and a global manufacturing and technology company—all wishing to expand overseas.

“Most of my practice is noncontroversial, nondispute-oriented, which I really like, because I’m building, not fighting,” Schwesig says, adding that she relishes the challenges of assisting clients in expanding into new markets. “I like working with all my clients, but a real pleasure is helping a company go overseas for the first time.”

Above all, Schwesig views international law as “your law juxtaposed against another law.” She explains: “I often say that you can’t be a good international lawyer unless you’re a good domestic lawyer. International law lays an international blanket over everything you do domestically. At the core of the practice is the ability to spot issues in this unique area.”