A testament to the breadth of Professor Adrienne Davis’s intellectual and personal range, the speakers at her installation as the William M. Van Cleve Professor of Law commented on three facets: scholar, writer, and educator.

“Adrienne Davis contributes to building a great academic institution through the intellectual engagement that she creates with students and other scholars. She is a leader who glues the intellectual community together,” said Kent Syverud, dean and the Ethan A.H. Shepley University Professor at the November 11, 2008, ceremony held at Washington University Law.

Syverud observed that Davis’ Stanford Law Review article, “The Private Law of Race and Sex: An Antebellum Perspective,” is among the top 10 works of legal scholarship. Overall, Davis’ scholarly work centers on three areas: the private law of slavery and gender, such as contracts and torts; feminist legal theory; and the legal philosophy of African-American reparations.

Commenting on Davis as writer, her longtime friend and noted legal scholar, Robert S. Chang, now at Seattle University School of Law, noted that in addition to the “brilliantly analytic” Davis, there is the author who is unafraid to take the risk of revealing herself in her work, “forcing readers to look within to see how we limit ourselves.”

Throughout the years, Davis and Chang have been co-authoring “epistolary exchanges”—letters on legal topics that Davis terms “explicitly personal.” With race as their central topic, they aim to reduce the distance between the personal and the academic, and have moved readers to an extent that has been “almost frightening,” Davis says.

Peter Van Cleve, JD ’86, finds it especially fitting that Davis, a renowned educator, would be selected for the chair named for his father, “a teacher and counselor in every aspect of his life.” Davis is the second holder of the chair; the inaugural recipient was former Washington University Law professor Jane Aiken, whose work and reputation helped draw Davis to Washington University.

The professorship was established in honor of the late William M. Van Cleve, JD ’53. An alumni leader and devoted friend of Washington University Law, Van Cleve was chairman of the St. Louis firm of Bryan Cave, chair and life member of the Washington University Board of Trustees, and founding member and chair of the law school’s National Council. The professorship was made possible by gifts in memory of Van Cleve, including support from the Emerson Charitable Trust. Van Cleve served with distinction as a longtime director of Emerson.

Davis said she feels a close connection to her benefactor in part because he was “a private lawyer, dedicated to making the law reflect justice in people’s lives.” Davis also acknowledged her appreciation for having found the “academic good life” as defined by her college mentor, bell hooks: “people you love, work you love, a place you love, and the resources to live fully in all three.”

In her address, she discussed her research on several cases from the era of U.S. slavery when the concepts of humanity and property were commingled, and demonstrated a technique she employs with her students.

“The unsettling process of examining these cases helps them confront a system that could only be incoherent given its corrupt underpinnings,” Davis said. “This inquiry encourages students to develop and articulate their own perspectives on the rule of law and fairness, and its relationship to morality and their own sense of ethics and justice.”

Davis’s installation address can be viewed at the law school’s video collection (law.wustl.edu/News/index.asp?id=1199).