DAVID C. MASON, JD ’83, recalls his first view of Mudd Hall as a new law student. “My impression was that the building wasn’t finished,” says Mason, now a judge in the 22nd Judicial Circuit of Missouri. “I was surprised to find out that it was.

“I was really serious,” says Mason. “I started asking why it was this way, and I learned that there was a popular movement in the architectural world in the 1970s called the ‘fortress look.’ But it actually looked like a building that was designed so that as little money as possible would be spent on it.”

Despite the building, Mason says that Washington University “turned out to be probably the best place in the country for me to go to school. The faculty was not only informative but nurturing.”

Mason and his teammate, Cathy Gilbert Kelly, JD ’83, also absorbed enough trial and advocacy skills along the way to gain national recognition as students. The two garnered the 1983 championship title from the American College of Trial Lawyers National Trial Competition.

“For me that was a game changer. There was a great deal of local and statewide publicity,” Mason says. “When I first started practicing, I was trusted with civil cases that had to be tried right away. In my first court appearances, the judge would treat me as an experienced lawyer.”

Upon graduation, Mason became an assistant attorney general. In 1985, he was appointed general counsel of the Missouri Department of Corrections. Charged with reducing the upward spiral of inmate lawsuits, he developed a highly effective inmate grievance system. He then worked for several St. Louis firms before being appointed the youngest circuit judge in Missouri at age 35.

Mason says that as a judge he appreciates “presiding over jury trials where there are really good lawyers on both sides, because the justice system in those cases is working well.” But the most rewarding aspect has been the occasions when he meets “former criminal defendants on the street who tell me how their lives have turned around.”

Despite his busy caseload on the bench, Mason continues to serve as the longtime head coach of the law school’s Trial Team. He spends about 240 hours advising students each semester, working with assistant coaches and attorneys Mark Rudder, JD ’91, Kenneth R. Heineman, JD ’66, David Fahrenkamp, Jennifer Hofman, and Rebecca Nickelson. In his 30 years as assistant coach and then head coach, the team has won two national championships and advanced 16 times to the national quarterfinals and beyond.

Mason says he relishes that moment when he sees “the light bulb go on in my students’ minds, and I know that they can become trial lawyers.”