

Lessons in Dedication

Professor blazes trail while working on behalf of children of the world.

By Annie Flachsbarth, BA '07

Washburn University School of Law's Distinguished Professor **Linda Elrod, '72**, learned the importance of protecting children at the age of 12 when her parents divorced. She saw firsthand how hard it was for a single mother to cope with work and care for three children and how strongly she wanted to preserve the relationship with both parents while her younger sister was intensely angry with her father for several years.

"I saw divorce from a child's point of view, and I saw the differences in the way children reacted to divorce," said Elrod. She felt children deserved a voice.

Elrod spent every Saturday morning and most summers at her father's law office, answering phones and helping wherever needed. Her father had hired the first female attorney in Johnson County—Gwen Falkenberg, a married mother of two, who practiced family and real estate law and was on a board that helped teenage mothers. She became a role model of someone who "had it all"—challenging career and family. Those early encounters with lawyers, the law, and law practice set the stage for a lifelong love of learning and service.

Even with the seeds planted for a future in law, Elrod never intended to go to law school. Instead, she attended Washburn University to follow in her mother's footsteps by becoming an English teacher. When Dr. Eldo Bunge, head of the English department, refused to count a course from Copenhagen toward her major, her career path changed. Unable to begin working toward her Ph.D., she took the LSAT and applied to Washburn Law. Deans John Howe and Ray Spring let her enter as a provisional student in January 1969.

Standing out as the only woman among the 109 men in her class, Elrod also attracted attention because of her hard work and intellect. Even though she worked two jobs, one teaching ninth grade English in the afternoons, she was only the second female to receive the Nick Cossman Scholarship Award for highest grades in the freshman class. In presenting the award, Professor Jim Ahrens noted Elrod was "not only personable, but also perspicacious, perceptive, and persevering." It was likely these very traits that kept her on Spring's mind when, only a year after graduation in 1973, she was asked to teach summer school when a professor took a magistrate job. In March 1974,

when she was seven months pregnant and working for the Kansas Judicial Council, she filled in for an ill professor during her lunch hours. She was offered a full-time position a week later.

Elrod has taught many different classes over the years, but her impressive and extensive résumé extends well beyond her scholarly duties. She is the Richard S. Richter Distinguished Professor of Law and the director of the Washburn Law Children and Family Law Center. She has written countless articles for law reviews and authored a national family law treatise, a state family law treatise, and co-authored a family law textbook that has been used in 35 law schools. She is a sought-after expert for media interviews and has given more than 170 presentations at local, national, and international events—giving her the opportunity to speak and teach in places like Australia, Canada, England, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Serbia. She was a Fulbright Senior Specialist in Ireland.

Elrod was the first female president of the Topeka Bar Association in 1986-87. She had a colleague, Jim Wadley, design a poster that lawyers gave to dozens of schools to celebrate the bicentennial of the Constitution. She became active in the American Bar Association (ABA) Family Law Section and from 1992-2016 was editor-in chief of the *Family Law Quarterly*, a national publication sent to 12,000 lawyers. In 2000-01, she was the sixth female president of the ABA Family Law Section. For many years, she served on the ABA Steering Committee on the Unmet Legal Needs of Children and on the Pro Bono Advisory Committee on Representing Children in Custody and Adoption. She has been on the U.S. State Department Advisory Committee on Private International Law since 2009.

Through it all, her inspiration for focusing on family law stems from her commitment to always do what is best for children.

"She is constantly motivated to improve the system," said **Ronald Nelson, '81**, a family law attorney in Overland Park, Kan. "Ultimately, she wants to improve the practice across the globe so that children are considered in everything that family lawyers do—rather than have it be done to them."

In fact, one of Elrod's favorite accomplishments was organizing and leading an international, multidisciplinary think tank called the Wingspread Conference. Family law professionals worked on ways to improve outcomes for children in high-conflict custody cases by improving the system, including giving children a voice. The white paper has served as a model for reform.

According to Thomas Romig, dean, Washburn Law, that intense passion she has for family law is what keeps her going.

"She has seen the significant needs in the law to protect children and help families," said Romig. "It is her mission to develop this area of the law, and people from across the world contact her for her expertise and advice."

As a professor, Elrod's credentials, teaching style, and commitment to the field are attractive to incoming students.

"I knew I wanted to go into family law, and Linda Elrod was the reason I came to Washburn," said former student **Ashlyn Yarnell, '13**, a family law attorney in Overland Park, Kan.

"She's the perfect marriage between a practitioner and a teacher and an advocate for family law practices across the country. If you have a tie to her, there is an expectation that you have been taught properly and know your stuff."

Elrod's accomplishments are impressive, to say the least, but also inspiring when considering she has raised two successful children, traveled the world, and remains a constant resource for others in the field.

"She does all of these different things, yet she's very focused," said Nelson. "She expects excellence of others, but at the same time, she is encouraging and enthusiastic about helping people be their best, get involved, and do as much as they can."

While some with her success may have been tempted to move to greener pastures, Elrod remains extremely loyal to Washburn Law.

"You've got to be ready to seize the opportunities when they present themselves," said Elrod. "Every time that I came up with an idea, Washburn has helped me and supported me, and that has made all the difference."

Photo by Doug Stremel

