

Lifetime of Service

Thomas J. Romig to step down as dean after 11 years.

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Integrity, honesty, and honor are at the heart of being a lawyer and are values Thomas J. Romig, Dean of the Washburn University School of Law for the last 11 years, has carried with him as he's led the school.

Establishing Hard Work and Values

As an undergraduate at Kansas State University, Romig became inspired to pursue a career in law by an adjunct professor teaching business law. The professor's name was Don Hill and he was a Manhattan attorney and a Washburn Law graduate. Since Romig was in the Army ROTC program and incurred a two-year service obligation upon graduation, his plan was to serve the two years in the Army and then use the GI Bill to go to law school.

Following graduation he received a commission as a Second Lieutenant in Military Intelligence and was assigned to the airborne at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He so enjoyed the life of an Army paratrooper so much that he forgot about the plan to go to law school. After four years, he had a life-altering event that changed the course of his military career. He was participating in a military parachute exercise with the 82nd Airborne Division when he experienced a malfunction of his parachute. The first part of the parachute jump had gone well as his parachute canopy had deployed perfectly. He was one of several hundred descending paratroopers when his canopy collapsed and he fell 75 feet. The long recovery time from the accident and subsequent back surgery allowed him to reflect on his career aspirations and the original plan to attend law school. He decided to pursue a law degree and was selected to attend the Santa Clara University School of Law through the Army Funded Legal Education Program.

After graduating from law school, he became an Army Judge Advocate and served in a variety of assignments including three years teaching international law at the Army JAG School in Charlottesville, Virginia.

In 2001, he was named the 36th Judge Advocate General of the Army — the Army's top military lawyer. Ironically, the first speaking engagement he had after assuming the position was at Washburn University School of Law, addressing the Kansas National Guard. At the time, he had not considered becoming dean of a law school, let alone at Washburn.

He retired from the Army in October 2005, after having served 34 years. In December 2005, he accepted the position of Deputy Chief Counsel for the Federal Aviation Administration and later became the Acting Chief Counsel.

During his last several years in the Army and while in the FAA, he and his wife, Pam, were coming back to Kansas more and more often. They went to high school reunions, attended K-State football games, and visited relatives.

Their growing desire to be back in Kansas and his desire to have a capstone experience for his career led him to apply for



Photo by Michael C. Snell

The Farm

In 2007, when making the change from Virginia to Topeka, Kansas, Dean Romig spent some time searching for a home. He and his wife found their fit on a plot of land in southwest Shawnee County, coincidentally already in the Washburn Law family as it was previously owned by two Washburn Law alumni.

Growing up in Manhattan, Kansas, he gained an appreciation for the importance and value of land. The entire time in the Army, he knew if he went back to Kansas, he wanted to purchase some land.

"When you move around in the military, you don't have that opportunity to really establish roots anywhere," he said.

After he steps down as dean, Romig is hoping he can spend more time on the property, a total of about 77 acres with a 3-acre pond.

"It's very peaceful out there. I'm hoping, I will have time to spend on the tractor and to work on the property."



Photo by Doug Stremel

the dean position at Washburn Law. He began his tenure as the Washburn Law Dean on July 1, 2007.

Leading Through a Changing Landscape

Anyone who leads an academic department for 11 years is going to see profound change in how the field grows, the interests of students and faculty members, and how economic and political factors can change an industry.

“It’s caused me to appreciate even more the importance of having a good legal education system where students not only learn the law, but they learn the practice elements of being a lawyer, and maybe most importantly the value of professionalism, integrity, and ethics,” Romig said. “There is not a better place anywhere in our country to teach that than Washburn Law.”

The values he carries with him as a lawyer played out in 2010 when he led the Law School through one of the nation’s worst economic downturns and a prolific amount of negative media coverage about law schools lacking transparency and being a poor investment for students.

“The criticisms of not being transparent or not providing a good value did not apply to us, but it was affecting everyone’s perceptions of law schools. We had to figure out a way to weather through it,” Romig said.

Law schools around the country had two choices – if they thought it was going to be a short-term matter, they could decrease admission standards and keep class sizes and budgets steady. If they thought it might go on for awhile and wanted to hold onto their reputation and credentials, they’d have to drop their class size. Washburn Law chose the latter option.

“We had to tighten our financial belts and reduce our spending in a lot of areas, and that enabled us to bring in smaller classes. We also looked at this as an opportunity to keep credentials up, attract the best and brightest students and have it reflected in our rankings.”

The plan worked, and the national rankings of Washburn Law have improved. The Law School was ranked 15th nationally in Legal Writing in U.S. News & World Report’s Best Grad Schools in 2018. The National Jurist in 2017 named Washburn Law as one of the nation’s “Best Schools for Practical Training.” Washburn Law’s trial advocacy program was also ranked among the top 16 law schools in the nation the last two years by preLaw magazine.

Paul Hoferer, ’75, a member of the Washburn University Board of Regents and a member of the Washburn University Foundation Board of Directors, served on Washburn Law Alumni Association’s Board of Governors at the time Romig was hired. During the economic downturn, the Law School had tough decisions to make, but Hoferer considers the handling of the difficult situation a hallmark of Romig’s tenure.

“He and the faculty accepted the challenge and held the course for academic standards,” Hoferer said. “They managed to raise our national rankings and our prestige and never lost ground during the downturn. It was the ultimate example of making lemonade out of lemons and a major accomplishment.”

Setting a Pathway for the Future

One of the first major initiatives Romig put together was a task force for a new law building, as he, along with fellow faculty and alumni members, knew would be vital to keeping up the prominence of the law school. Washburn was providing a 21st century legal education, but needed better spaces to enhance the educational experience. To date, the Law School has raised more than \$8.4 million in private funding toward a new building, with a \$20 million commitment from the Washburn Board of Regents once \$20 million is raised.

“I think there is a lot of competition out there for law schools, so you have to have a leader who is not only a good academic role model, but someone who does not believe in the status quo,” Hoferer said. “You have to move forward, or you will be left behind. Dean Romig went to work, and today, we are much closer to getting that new building.”

Putting the right people in place has also been a pillar of success for Romig, according to Joseph Mastrosimone, associate dean for academic affairs. In the past few years, many senior faculty members have retired and the Law School has had to complete nationwide searches to find the best-fit people for Washburn Law.

“Dean Romig has kept a keen eye on making sure the faculty we hire fit into that culture and the new faculty hold the same values – collegiality, respect for others, and student-centered teaching and learning,” Mastrosimone said. “He has left this school in smart and capable hands.”

Under Romig’s leadership, three new centers – Robert J. Dole Center for Law and Government, Oil and Gas Law Center, and International and Comparative Law Center – were created with many initiatives and programs receiving national recognition. One of his final initiatives has been laying the groundwork for an additional center on rural law.

“One of his most recent accomplishments was the establishment of an agricultural law program which has proven to be quite important,” said Jerry Farley, president, Washburn University. “This program is a vital component of the Rural Legal Practice Initiative, which is a partnership with Kansas State University – an initiative aimed at addressing the dramatic shortage of lawyers in rural Kansas.”

One of the last changes Romig brought to Washburn Law happened this spring – teaching a military law course, which is something the school hasn’t offered for many years. Because of the extensive travel schedule required of the dean, he hasn’t been able to teach but wanted to do it in his final semester.

“You can come out of teaching a class and you’re kind of on an adrenaline high because of the interaction with the students,” Romig said. “It’s like if you try a case, when you do your final argument and you hear the jury verdict.”

When Romig was looking for the capstone of his career, he was hoping to pull all of the things he’s done together to give back to the profession by mentoring students and contributing legal education.

“Coming in here, having some influence on legal education, working with a great faculty and staff, enthusiastic students and dedication alumni has been very rewarding,” he said. “If I had to pick anything to do, there couldn’t have been anything better than being dean of Washburn Law.”



Washburn Law faculty, staff, and alumni celebrate Dean Romig at his retirement reception. Photos by Nick Krug