Kent Smith, ’66, can recall moments from the earliest years of his law career with incredible clarity, describing long-settled cases with the kind of meticulous attention to detail that made him one of the nation’s top construction lawyers.

When he was just starting out, for instance, he was able to take on a federal contract case that had been lost by other counsel after an administrative hearing, appeal it to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, and obtain an excellent result for his client. He still counts it among the proudest moments of a career that spanned more than four decades.

“I painstakingly reviewed the record and all of the evidence,” he said. “I was very young at the time – I was not yet 30 years old. It was small by comparison to the cases I handled later in life, but it was a big confidence booster, and I was very proud of that moment.”

Having worked for the Atomic Energy Commission in Tennessee before spending most of his professional life as a partner at Smith, Currie & Hancock in Atlanta, Kent recently retired, but he has remained involved with Washburn University School of Law in a big way. He and his wife, Karen,
gave $500,000 to the law school’s building project campaign, which will help fund a new state-of-the-art facility.

The Smiths made their gift because of their gratitude for the law school and because they wanted to honor the late Delmas Hill, ‘29. Hill was appointed to the U. S. District Court of Kansas by President Harry Truman and elevated to the 10th Circuit Appeals Court by President John F. Kennedy, serving on the federal bench for 28 years. Kent clerked for Hill after law school and credits Hill for giving him a unique perspective on the law that can only be gained through such experience.

“Serving as a law clerk is an experience that … enables you to understand the law very well,” Kent said. “Judge Hill and I worked well together. He gave me tremendous responsibility, which I relished. How he arrived at his conclusions and developed his opinions and enunciated the precedents upon which he relied – all of that was experience that you really can’t get in any other way, because your judge is deciding real issues involving real people, and it’s going to have a big impact on their lives.”

In addition to being colleagues, Kent and Hill also became close friends. They spent many hours traveling together, driving across the Midwest to hear arguments in 10th Circuit cases. Even after Kent moved on professionally, he and Hill remained personally close – and when Kent met Karen, Hill made his wishes for their relationship clear.

“Judge Hill said, ‘When you get married’ – because he always spoke with certainty – ‘I would like to do the ceremony.’ And he did. He was then retired, and we went out to Wichita, and he married us. And that was the only marriage ceremony that he performed in his entire judicial career.”

Karen said there was “just no question” that Hill would officiate their wedding – though she recalled a small hitch in their plans just prior to the ceremony. Hill had written a double-ring ceremony, but Kent informed him that he wasn’t sure he wanted to wear a wedding ring.

“And Judge Hill said, ‘It’s going to be a double-ring ceremony,’” Kent said. “So he pulled up to a jewelry store, and he told me to go inside and get a ring – which of course I did. He was a big force in my life.”

In addition to his legal expertise and unimposing confidence, Hill also shared with Kent a love of Washburn – in fact, Hill helped raise a lot of the funds to build the current facility that contains a room bearing his name, the cost of which Kent contributed. Having grown up on a farm and ranch in southern Kansas, Kent watched his older brother succeed in medical school, and he learned early on the importance of education. Kent ended up at Washburn when teachers at his undergraduate university encouraged him to attend law school.

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“I owe a great debt of gratitude to Washburn. It played a very influential role in my life and my success. I’ve worked with lawyers from all over the world, and I’ve always been proud of the talents that I think Washburn has helped me enhance and the understanding of the law and, frankly, life itself.” – Kent Smith

“I was green as guacamole when I got (to Topeka), but I studied very diligently and I did very well,” he said. “I owe a great debt of gratitude to Washburn. It played a very influential role in my life and my success. I’ve worked with lawyers from all over the world, and I’ve always been proud of the talents that I think Washburn has helped me enhance and the understanding of the law and, frankly, life itself.”

Karen is also grateful for the opportunity to give to the law school’s building campaign.

“Washburn has been so influential in Kent’s life, and I appreciate all that Washburn has done for him,” she said.

She added this contribution is made in the same spirit as the gift made by Washburn University Foundation Board of Trustees immediate past chair Cynthia Heath, BA ’71, who issued a $1 million dollar-for-dollar challenge.

“I understand they’re going to continue having a room dedicated to Judge Hill in the new law school,” Kent said. “I’ve been pretty generous with Washburn financially all along, but this time I decided to make a pretty special contribution, just to help the institution that’s meant so much to me. Hopefully it will do the same for others, and I’m sure that it will.”