

Giving Back

Alumnus Helping to Educate the Next Generation of Attorneys

By Angela Lutz

Like many criminal defense attorneys, **Ronald Wurtz, BA '70, JD '73**, pursued his profession because he is passionate about achieving justice and making sure everyone gets a fair trial. The reason he's stuck with it for more than 40 years is even more straightforward: He genuinely enjoys his work.

"In criminal defense, I've found you meet a very wide range of interesting people, and I like that," Wurtz said. "Trials require a mix of intellectual performance, strategy, and a good deal of adrenaline. It's exciting, and there were times I would come back and say, 'My goodness, they are paying me to do this.' I think that's probably what kept me in it, I enjoy what I do."

Since last fall, he has shared his enthusiasm with Washburn University School of Law students as a visiting professor and supervisor of the criminal defense section of the Washburn Law Clinic. Through the clinic, students gain real-world experience by representing actual clients in actual cases, all while receiving the guidance and support of Washburn faculty. The clinic allows students to help the Topeka community, as the clients they serve could not otherwise afford legal representation.

For Wurtz, this arrangement is ideal, as it helps students learn to become competent attorneys while also filling a shortage of trained criminal defense lawyers in the state. He believes practical experience is equally important as what students learn in the classroom.

"Until you go out and see how theories are applied in real life, they really don't click," he said. "If you can get some experience while you're still a student, it gives you a head start. I'm most proud of the students' dedication. They work hard to relate to the clients, who often come from difficult situations. They've had some great results and they've truly helped a lot of people."

Wurtz also places tremendous value on volunteerism, having served on ethics and criminal law committees for the Topeka Bar Association and investigated ethics violations for the disciplinary administrator. He encourages students to give back, and last semester they helped with the Topeka Bar Association's Clean Slate Day, a pro bono project that allows qualifying individuals to have criminal arrests, convictions, and diversions expunged.

"At some point, people who got in trouble and made bad choices outgrow it," Wurtz said. "They serve their sentence, pay their debt, and it's time to let them move forward. The expungement program helps them shake that past they have outgrown."



Ronald Wurtz, BA '70, JD '73

Wurtz's professional focus on being of service stems from his evolution as an attorney. After graduating from Washburn Law, he spent four years in the United States Air Force, where he got his first taste of criminal defense as a counselor working court-martial cases. After his service, he worked as a prosecutor for about a year and a half before becoming a public defender in Shawnee County.

While Wurtz describes his criminal defense career as enjoyable, one aspect that he found challenging was working with the Kansas Death Penalty Defense Unit, which he started in 1994. At the time, he was chief public defender in Shawnee County, and he found the high-stakes work overwhelming and emotionally draining, even as he recognized its necessity.

"You have to see what the stakes are. They are going to kill my client if I lose this case," he said. "It was extremely stressful. I am very morally opposed to the death penalty, so it was hard work."

Today as a professor, Wurtz finds this next phase of his legal career very satisfying and says he gets a kick out of working with young people and drawing on their energy and excitement. He finds the experience reminiscent of his own days in law school.

"I think I got a great education both in undergrad and law school," he said. "The friends I made then are still people I lean on and always seem to be there for me. It was an excellent experience. When you go to a great school, great people go there with you, and it helps you get through life."

In his true generous spirit, Wurtz is pleased to have a chance to serve the Topeka community and to give back to Washburn any way he can. He credits his wife of 52 years for supporting him throughout his career, and he also cites the professors at the law school and the education he received as instrumental in his success by giving him opportunities to grow and thrive as a professional. Washburn gave him scholarships to pursue his studies, which he is just as grateful for today as he was 50 years ago.

"Washburn has been very good to me. I got a scholarship to come here, and I probably couldn't have gone to college without it. I owe Washburn, I want to give back because I got lucky enough to find a profession that fit me, and I still like doing it. It's good to serve."