



Students work in the new Law Clinic. Photo by Jeremy Wangler

Advancing the Law Clinic

Students Continue to Gain Real-World Experience in the Newly Modernized Law Clinic

By Angela Lutz

For more than 53 years, the Washburn Law Clinic has helped underserved members of the Topeka community gain legal representation while preparing students to become practicing lawyers. Now, thanks to the new law clinic space in Robert J. Dole Hall, the clinic will be able to expand its footprint to better serve its clients and Washburn University School of Law students, all made possible by alumni and friends like the Spigarelli family.

“The new space creates a welcoming environment for clients, who are often coming to the Washburn Law Clinic during some of the most difficult times in their lives,” said Michelle Ewert, law school professor and clinic director. “From the bright, open reception area to the spacious interview rooms with large windows, the building creates an atmosphere that is both inviting and professional.”

Founded in 1970, the law clinic’s mission is to help develop law students into thoughtful, skilled, ethical attorneys by allowing them to practice law and represent clients under the personalized supervision of an experienced faculty attorney.

This innovative arrangement allows students to gain vital experience by representing real clients in real cases while still being able to rely on the expertise and guidance of their instructors. Over the years, it has become a model for other law school clinics across the country.

Clinic participants are afforded this exceptional opportunity through special permission from the Kansas Supreme Court, which allows senior law students to practice law and represent clients in courtroom proceedings. When searching for a job after graduation, law clinic students will have a distinct advantage, as they will have already argued cases in court, questioned witnesses, and taken primary responsibility for their clients. In the new space, students will have even more opportunities to work together, hone their skills, and benefit their community.

“The student workspace and conference room allow space for collaboration as students work together to help solve their clients’ problems,” Ewert said. “The building features state-of-the-art technology, including a green room recording studio that clinic students can use to record presentations for community members and CLEs for attorneys.”

SUPPORT WASHBURN LAW CLINIC

The Washburn Law Clinic plays a vital role in students' legal education, giving them real-world experience while also helping underserved clients who could not otherwise afford representation.

The clinic is the second-largest provider of pro-bono civil legal services in the state of Kansas – but additional funds would enable the clinic to expand and educate more students and serve more people.

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“The technology is the same as modern courtrooms use,” added **Debi Schrock, AA '87**, law clinic administration managing director. “When they graduate, our students will be prepared for courtrooms that are now coming loaded with technology, which is something that usually has a learning curve. The new space also gives us room to expand our offerings, which in turn will benefit the community.”

In addition to the students, the law clinic is an advantage to the Topeka community by providing pro bono services in the areas of family justice, immigration, civil law, and criminal defense to individuals who could not otherwise afford an attorney. This includes common concerns such as adoptions, guardianships, paternity actions, emancipations, divorces involving minor children, consumer issues, elder law, estate planning, and expungement of criminal records.

The clinic's meaning-driven work has always appealed to Sheila Reynolds, a former Washburn Law professor who taught at the law clinic for 31 years until her retirement in 2010. She donated to help make the clinic space a reality.

“I feel an intense loyalty to the law school,” she said. “I feel like I owe Washburn Law a lot for giving me an excellent environment to be a lawyer, so when it was time to raise money, I was happy to give. I hope this beautiful new building enables the faculty and staff and students to continue having

an environment that encourages Washburn's tradition of offering positive support for everybody.”

The clinic's mission also resonates with the Spigarelli family, who own a personal injury law firm in Pittsburg, Kansas, that consists of **Fred Spigarelli, '70**, and his daughters **Angela Spigarelli, '98**, and **Kala Spigarelli, '90**. Growing up poor in rural Kansas, Fred believes Washburn gave him opportunities to succeed where other schools might not have. Attending Washburn continues to be a tradition for the Spigarelli family, as Kala's sons are also recent graduates. For these reasons, the family was eager to be involved with the building project.

“Me, my dad, and my sister, Angela, all went to Washburn and graduated law school,” Kala said. “Dad has always believed that Washburn gave him the chance to realize his dream of becoming a lawyer when he thought nobody else would. He's always wanted to be involved with helping other people in the state go to law school, so that's why we decided to donate.”

For Schrock, who has worked at the clinic for more than 25 years and witnessed many drastic changes, the new space will help Washburn students excel as the legal profession continues to evolve – and encourage new students, faculty, and donors to keep the clinic's important work moving forward.

“This is something that was really necessary for our students to be competitive in the hiring market,” she said. “Being able to raise the money to have such a grand building speaks not only to the law school but the campus and the community as a whole.”



The lobby of the Law Clinic serves as an inviting space for clients. The Law Clinic has its own entrance to help maintain privacy. Photo by Jeremy Wangler