



Jennifer Salva. Photo by Doug Stremel

Seasoned Advocate

Student, pageant participant knows her experiences will be important as she begins her career.

By Angela Lutz

From pageants and disability advocacy to the Slovak Republic and back again, Washburn University School of Law student Jennifer Salva's career path has been anything but typical. **Salva, '19**, graduated from Washburn in May, and various aspects of her unique background will continue to inspire her work as an attorney.

For starters, Salva has been an advocate for individuals with disabilities since she was in grade school. Her younger sister was born with a chromosomal translocation, a type of genetic mutation that, in her sister's case, caused deafness, developmental delays, and cognitive disabilities. Instead of feeling intimidated or bashful when curious strangers or classmates stared, Salva felt empowered.

"I've always been so proud that she's my sister," Salva said. "I was always very interested in telling my peers about her, teaching them sign language, and telling them it's okay to interact with

her even though she has disabilities. That turned into teaching sign language classes and advocating to teachers about how to be more inclusive."

Originally from Sugar Creek, Missouri, Salva and her family moved to Olathe, Kansas, so her sister could attend the Kansas School for the Deaf, where her sister eventually earned her high school diploma. Salva describes her sister as intelligent and capable, and watching her struggle to find meaningful employment has been a significant motivating factor in Salva's decision to become a lawyer.

After graduation, in addition to joining Kansas City-based firm Lathrop Gage following a federal clerkship with Judge Julie Robinson in the United States District Court for the District of Kansas, Salva will serve on the advocacy committee at Inclusion Connections, Inc., an Olathe-based nonprofit focused on helping individuals with disabilities find jobs.

“Having a job is so essential for personal fulfillment,” Salva said. “This is important to me because it’s such a challenge for my sister. Without my sister, I don’t think I’d be on the path that I am that led me to law school. She’s the reason behind so many choices that I’ve made and will continue to make, both personally and professionally.”

Along with her sister, Salva is motivated by her Slovak heritage. Her hometown is packed with Slovak immigrants, including Salva’s grandparents, whose families came to the area to work at a nearby oil plant.

“I always say if you throw a rock in the air in Sugar Creek, you’ll hit a relative of mine,” she joked.

It was Salva’s love and appreciation for Slovak culture that inspired her to start competing in pageants. In 2011, she became Miss Czech-Slovak Kansas, and the following year she became Miss Czech-Slovak United States, which she still considers one of her proudest moments. Her title earned her a trip to the Slovak Republic to visit her family, as well as scholarship money. Despite her travels, she knew the place she could do the most good was right here at home.

“I realized that although I love to travel, I want to be in Kansas City,” she said. “I want to be where my sister is. I think when you’re younger you think you have to go somewhere to affect change, but there’s a lot of work that needs to be done right here, too.”

Still, Salva loved competing in pageants so much she decided to enter the Miss America system, and in 2014, she was first runner-up in the Miss Kansas competition, earning the title of Miss Kansas Sweetheart. She has also been named Miss Topeka, Miss Johnson County, and Miss Leavenworth County. True to form, Salva used her public platform to speak up for individuals with disabilities like her sister.

“I used my pageant titles to go visit schools and talk to kids and teachers about inclusion of people with disabilities,” she said. “People will listen to Miss Topeka more than they will just Jennifer.”

In the professional world, people often seem surprised that Salva has competed in pageants, but she insists that the difference between a crown and sash and a successful attorney isn’t as great as it initially appears – especially because, as Salva said, you get out of pageants what you put into them.

“I got to hone my advocacy skills,” Salva explained. “I learned how to compose myself in public. That was helpful in going into law school, where you’re expected to speak in front of a lot

of people. When you have a crown and sash on, people expect you to be on your feet 100 percent of the time, and I think that’s really similar to being an attorney.”

During Salva’s time at Washburn, she has earned a number of scholarships from the university, as well as the J.L. Weigand, Jr. Notre Dame Legal Education Trust, which aims to keep the best attorneys from Kansas practicing in the state. She has also earned a scholarship from the Kansas Bar Foundation each year of her law school career – awards she is particularly proud of given she previously worked as an editor of the Kansas Bar Association’s journal. She considers these scholarships essential to her achievements at Washburn.

“Scholarships have allowed me to focus on my studies, which has been monumental to my success in law school,” Salva said. “When your tuition is paid for and you’re not constantly worried about student loans, you can focus on your studies. I’m so incredibly thankful, and I can’t wait until I’m at a point in my career where I can financially give the same opportunity to other students.”

Top Law Student of the Year

In April 2019, the Washburn University School of Law announced Jennifer Salva had been named one of National Jurist magazine’s 2019 Top Law Students.

The award recognizes “smart, passionate, worthy students...who have overcome a host of obstacles and are resolved to helping others,” according to the magazine’s website.

In wanting to create a more inclusive place to live for her sister, who was born with profound developmental disabilities, Salva uncovered a passion to increase access to justice for marginalized populations, despite what that barrier to justice may be. Her extensive experience working with individuals with poor communication skills, and varying ability levels, and her knowledge of American Sign Language equipped her with a special understanding of how to serve others.

“This recognition demonstrates how great of a place Washburn Law is to earn a legal education,” Salva said. “I chose to come to law school to increase my ability to help others. But I didn’t realize how much help I would receive along the way from professors, Washburn Law alumni, and the J.L. Weigand, Jr. Legal Education Trust as I worked toward my degree. I’m really lucky that I get to have my name on this award, but it is emblematic of Washburn Law, its professors (especially Emily Grant and Joseph Mastro Simone, who have been mentors for me and so many others), and other Washburn Law students who are doing incredibly important work in their communities, too. I am proud to represent Washburn Law, and all that it embodies, in this unique way.”