

Honorary Degree

Wood continues to hone expertise on international employment law.

By Angela Lutz

Teri Wilford Wood, '78, loves a good challenge – the kind of legal conundrum that requires research, problem-solving, and relationships to find a workable solution. During a career in international employment law that has spanned more than two decades, Wood has distinguished herself as one of the field's top professionals. She recently joined the New York City office of Jackson Lewis, a labor and employment law firm that employs more than 900 lawyers at 58 offices in the United States.

In her new of counsel position, Wood continues to cultivate and hone her expertise in global legal issues, languages, cultures, and workplace needs. She focuses her practice on international employment issues, corporate governance and investigations, workplace training, and restrictive covenants worldwide.

“Jackson Lewis asked me to focus on areas that tapped my global in-house experience to grow that dimension of the firm,” Wood said. “As a corporate labor and employment lawyer, I had responsibility for nearly every legal issue that touches the employment relationship. And after a number of years at big companies, I had handled a good number of situations, both domestic and international.”

Wood is no stranger to high-profile appointments. Before joining Jackson Lewis, she served for 22 years as associate

general counsel at IBM Corporation, a position held by women in only a quarter of Fortune 500 companies. In this role, she headed IBM's Corporate Legal Human Resources Law Group, which is responsible for the company's employment, labor, benefits, and compensation law in 175 countries. Through these experiences, Wood has learned to navigate differences – both subtle and significant – in legal systems around the world.

“You find all sorts of variations that make international employment law both fascinating and confounding,” she said. “A company that has operations overseas might develop one policy that applies the same to every employee in each country. And you might think that's an appropriate and fair approach – until you consult local country law and find legal differences that require policy differences in many countries.”

Instead of getting overwhelmed by the many stakeholders and requirements she has to manage, Wood finds these legal and cultural differences extremely fascinating and gratifying – not to mention the many different laws she encounters in each of the 50 states domestically. The ability to find personal satisfaction in a challenge is one reason she has had such an exceptional career in her chosen field. She also enjoys her work tremendously, which she believes is essential to success in any profession.

“It's a real labor of love, and I've had lots of fun with it,” she said of her career. “That's not universally the case. I've heard some say that the real draw is a title, salary, and nice office, but that the work is not so interesting. That might carry one for the short-term, but to sustain a robust and fulfilling legal career over the long-term, look for the challenge and what energizes you as a lawyer and a person. And with that in place, what could be better than passing it all along to others as a mentor, manager, or supporter?”

Though Wood has excelled in international employment law, she did not initially aspire to be a lawyer. Her first job was as a broadcast journalist at a television station in Kansas City, Missouri, an experience that initially sparked her interest in First Amendment law. After starting at a law firm, she became an administrative judge at the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which introduced her to discrimination law and charted the course of her career. During this time of transition, she credits her education at Washburn



Teri Wilford Wood addresses graduates at the spring graduation ceremony. Photo by Earl Richardson



Teri Wilford Wood, '78, receives her honorary degree from Washburn University. From left to right: JuliAnn Mazachek, vice president for academic affairs, and Terry Beck, BA '72, JD '75. Photo by Earl Richardson

University School of Law with giving her the versatility to adapt and take advantage of various opportunities she encountered.

“As I’ve discovered along the road of my career, any success that comes your way is due in large measure to recognizing and embracing opportunities – and a fair amount of luck,” she said. “Because I’ve had broad educational experiences and supportive mentors, family, and professors along the way, I’ve had the foundation to meet many challenges. But when the challenge was too overwhelming, that same foundation provided me with the resilience to regroup and seek help to rebuild. Much of that I trace back to my Washburn law school education and the starting point of my legal career.”

In May, Wood received an honorary doctor of law degree from Washburn University School of Law and had an opportunity to address graduates at the 2019 commencement ceremony. She remains involved on the advisory board for Washburn Law’s Transactional Law Center, and she regularly meets with several Washburn graduates who also reside in New York. These types of relationships, she said, have enriched both her career and her personal life.

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“I was absolutely surprised when I received the call from President Jerry Farley,” Wood said of her honorary degree. “This is, of course, a wonderful honor, and I’m deeply grateful. As I’ve said, luck, opportunities, and supportive people all play a major role in any successful career. I’ve had an abundance of all. But the most rewarding part ends up being the many relationships developed and growing along the way.”