

# Chief Justice

*Uniquely suited for current role, Luckert seizes historic opportunities.*

*By Angela Lutz*

From her third-story office in the Kansas Judicial Center, Supreme Court Chief Justice **Marla Luckert, BA '71, JD '80**, might just have the best view in Topeka. Outside the large plate-glass window behind her desk, the Kansas State Capitol sits proudly, its pointed, copper dome seeming to scrape the cloudless Midwestern sky.

“It’s a good reminder,” Luckert said, gazing at the iconic building. “I want to do everything I can for citizens of Kansas to make access to justice more than just a statement that we throw out. It’s something that’s real and meaningful.”

Initially appointed to the Kansas Supreme Court by Gov. Bill Graves in 2002, Luckert was sworn in as chief justice last December. She looks forward to hearing important cases that will have statewide impact and taking advantage of opportunities to address persistent shortages of funding and resources within the court system. Also on her list: taking another look at criminal justice reform, making the courts more efficient through digital case management, and addressing the root causes of criminal behavior to help break the cycle of recidivism.

“I think coming in new gives me the opportunity to re-examine things,” Luckert said. “Are there better solutions? I’m hoping

to challenge people to do that investigation in all of their jobs in all aspects of the court system, and I hope we are all open to seeing where that leads us.”

With a successful and varied legal career, Luckert is uniquely suited for her current role. Growing up in rural Kansas during the civil rights era, she knew she wanted to be a lawyer after reading “To Kill a Mockingbird” in grade school. As soon as she could, she joined the debate team and began honing her research and analysis skills. After graduating from Washburn University School of Law, she joined a Topeka firm where she specialized in health care law before being appointed to the Shawnee County District Court in 1992. She served on the district court bench for 10 years and became chief judge in 2000. Many of the cases she heard involved statewide concerns.

“When I first started, my firm had a philosophy of wanting their associates to have a diverse practice, which has proven to be a wonderful situation for me as a judge, where you do hear everything,” Luckert said. “My practice – because we did represent doctors and health care professionals across the state – led me to many courtrooms around Kansas. I feel like I know how their courts operate. I was in the courtroom frequently, which is also a good experience for a judge.”

As only the second woman to serve as chief justice of the Kansas Supreme Court, Luckert has arrived at an historic time: For the first time, Kansas has a female governor, chief justice, chief judge in the court of appeals, and Senate president. Throughout her career, Luckert said her gender has presented both challenges and opportunities in a traditionally male-dominated profession.

“I have faced many situations where I was the only woman in the room, but that often gave me a starting point where I was standing out,” she explained. “There were many people who took an interest in mentoring me, and they wanted to make sure I succeeded. At the same time, there were others who didn’t accept me. I was fortunate that none of those were total roadblocks or barriers to me and I was able to continue.”

Luckert also feels she’s been fortunate that her professional career has occurred in Topeka due largely to her connection with Washburn. Even 40 years later, she continues to cross



Photo submitted



The Hon. Marla Luckert sits in front of her view of the Kansas Capitol building which is a daily reminder to her to serve Kansans. Photo by Earl Richardson

paths with her former law school professors, who offer support and mentoring even today.

“Marla has always had a particularly positive attitude toward the school and toward the people she worked with at Washburn,” said Washburn University School of Law Professor Bill Rich, who taught Luckert’s research and writing class. “It’s similar to how she is in many other aspects of her life. She doesn’t take anything for granted. She’s always appreciative of others. She’s always respectful of others, and that makes us very lucky to have her as one of our graduates.”

In her professional life, Luckert has channeled her appreciation of others – particularly up-and-coming attorneys – into networks of support. She still keeps in touch with former students from her time as a Washburn law school professor, and she has worked in many organizations to start mentoring programs, which she said not only reignites her love of the law but strengthens the profession as a whole.

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“It’s fun to see people who are learning how to explore the law and finding their love for the law,” she said. “It inspires you and helps reinvigorate you. It has certainly helped me to have a network of support, and I hope we can have that for all attorneys. I believe we become stronger when we work together.”