

Double the Courtrooms

State-of-the-Art Courtrooms Provide Educational Opportunities and Unique Space

By Angela Lutz

When students enter the two new courtrooms at Washburn University School of Law, they are often awestruck. With sleek wood paneling, pendant lights, and the latest technological equipment, the recently dedicated Heath Family Appellate Courtroom and Michael C. Manning Trial Courtroom are being used for the first time by Washburn Law students and faculty this fall.

For Joseph Mastro Simone, Washburn Law professor and Center for Excellence in Advocacy director, the impact is nothing short of monumental.

“When students start coming to Washburn, I love to see their faces when they walk into the courtrooms,” Mastro Simone said. “I think it’s incredible for students to have so many new opportunities, and it will help Washburn continue to recruit amazing students and faculty for years to come. Those courtrooms in my mind are the crown jewel of the new building.”

The new courtrooms are a marked improvement that aim to meet the needs of both trial and appellate court. Mastro Simone said having two dedicated spaces in the new Robert J. Dole Hall gives students more chances not only to hone their legal

skills, but also to observe real-life lawyers and trials as they occur. The Heath Courtroom was designed to seat the entire Kansas Supreme Court so they can hold hearings there, and they and a panel of the Kansas Court of Appeals have already utilized the space. Proceedings in the Heath Courtroom on Nov. 3, 2023, allowed students a rare opportunity to observe the court in action.

“Those are exciting opportunities for students to be able to just walk down the hallway and observe those hearings,” Mastro Simone said. “Afterward, the judges are usually very gracious with their time and will meet with the students and answer questions. It’s a great networking opportunity.”

In the Manning Courtroom, students will be able to practice their pre-trial and trial advocacy skills and prepare for national mock trial competitions in a courtroom that Mastro Simone said “looks like something out of a movie,” complete with seating areas for a judge, witness, and jury. Similar to the Heath Courtroom, the law school will invite local judges to hold a day of hearings or a trial in the space. This will give students another exceptional educational opportunity and boost Washburn’s national profile, as the courtroom is also ideal for hosting regional and national competitions.



Left: Michael C. Manning Courtroom. Right: Manning speaks to a group of students during the dedication of the courtroom. Photos by Jeremy Wangler



Left: Heath Family Appellate Courtroom. Photo by Jeremy Wangler
 Right: Cynthia Heath welcomes the board of trustees to the courtroom. Photo submitted.

“Next year we’re hosting a regional trial advocacy competition,” Mastro Simone said. “We’re really excited to bring law students and faculty from other schools into our new home and show the place off.”

For the alumni who helped make the new courtrooms a reality, the decision to give back to Washburn University School of Law was all about helping future generations succeed. **Cynthia Heath, BA '71, H '22**, a former chair of the Washburn University Foundation board of trustees, donated because of the opportunities Washburn afforded her and her late husband, **David Heath, BA '70, JD '76**. In 2017, she issued a matching challenge that gave the law school building campaign the boost it needed.

“I made the gift to the law school because the law school gave my husband a second chance,” she said. “That second chance changed our lives, and it also changed the lives of many other people. I chose the Heath family name because it always takes many people to succeed in life, and I consider that a big family.”

As a first-generation college graduate, Heath knows that lifting up the lawyers of the future is more important than securing her family’s legacy, and she aims to accomplish that goal through her philanthropic endeavors.

“In the long run, this gift is about future students who will have a great opportunity to get a great education,” she said. “Making the gift facilitates other people’s legacies – it gives them the opportunity to have success. That’s what I’m proud of now – these students have a wonderful place to learn. They’ve

always had incredible programs at the law school, and now they have a place to showcase them.”

After a successful 44-year career that included arguing some of the most impactful commercial litigation and civil rights cases in Arizona and United States history, **Michael C. Manning, JD '77, H '07**, is proud to have contributed to the education and success of future generations of attorneys. He credits Washburn – and in particular former law school deans, James Concannon and Carl Monk – with showing him the immense good lawyers can do in their communities.

“Washburn gave me more than an excellent legal education,” Manning said. “Through a lot of little ways, it created in my mind the great impact and community good that lawyers can do. It really is a noble profession that can make things better for people and communities, and Washburn did that for me.”

As everyone settles into the new spaces, Manning is excited about the advantage the courtrooms will give Washburn Law students over their peers, as they are built to the exact specifications of courtrooms across the country and equipped with technology students will use in the real world. He is also proud to help future lawyers have a positive impact on their communities throughout their careers.

“The courtrooms will give students a leap in experience that some of their colleagues will not have,” he said. “This is a good venue for students to practice what will become their profession and later have an impact on the future of Topeka and the nation.”