In past decades, Washburn University School of Law has drawn talented women from around the world to follow in the footsteps of earlier alumnae. This section focuses on the success of eleven of Washburn Law’s rising stars. These women are having early career successes that the pioneer alumnae could have only dreamed of decades ago. The rising stars are up-and-coming women who are or have been tribal attorney’s, in high level attorney positions within the Federal Government, and high level executives in giant industries such as insurance and pharmaceuticals. These are alumnae whose careers bear watching as they quickly maneuver through the public and private world to conquer the challenges that lie ahead and to encourage others to do the same.

Women from Washburn are Making an Impact

Gwynne Harris-Birzer is an ambitious woman. As a child, she didn’t hear much about going to college. It wasn’t expected in her family. Undeterred, she worked, attended college part time, and earned her law degree at Washburn University School of Law while serving as guardian for a young niece.

Her career has been equally impressive, for she champions the causes of women and children wherever she is. As Assistant District Attorney for Shawnee County, Kansas, she prosecuted all rape, incest, sexual battery, and physical abuse of children cases. She provided sexual crime victim consultations and prosecuted cases under the sexual predator law. She made numerous presentations informing the public of functions within the district attorney’s office regarding sexual offenses.

Her ultimate goal, however, is to be a judge—a career that requires a broad range of experience. Another bold step—establishing a general practice law firm in Topeka—was required. Five years later, Ms. Birzer handles criminal, civil, domestic, probate, business, adoption, and Guardian Ad Litem for child in need of care cases. Her work has been
Although she has been out of law school less than two years, Heather Lorenz is well on her way in her legal career. Immediately following graduation, she joined Shook, Hardy & Bacon as an associate in the firm’s National Products Liability Litigation Group in Miami, Florida.

In addition, Ms. Lorenz is contributing to the legal profession through involvement with the American Civil Liberties Union and its Legal Panel in Miami. “This work is important to me, because I passionately believe in individual rights and freedoms, such as freedom of speech and religion. I also believe that everyone has the right to counsel even if they are financially unable to pay, so I’m involved in pro bono work,” Ms. Lorenz said.

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Patty Nieves is passionate about Indian Law. She is ICWA attorney/Tribal Council at the Tribal Justice Center of the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) in Bethel, Alaska. She came to that post following a law clerkship at the Superior Court in Bethel, Alaska. Her work is providing direct assistance to Indian families and leading to improvements in the tribal courts system. "I love what I’m doing," Ms. Nieves said. "I represent the 56 villages in the Y-K Delta of Alaska in state court matters involving the removal of native children from their homes and assist the tribes in getting children's cases transferred from state court to tribal court." In addition, she is helping the tribes establish and operate their own courts, training tribal court personnel, and assisting in the drafting of tribal policies, ordinances, and laws.

Lori Rinaldi managed to simultaneously earn two degrees—a JD and an MBA—while attending Washburn Law. Now she is putting the organizational skills she used for that balancing act to work in her dual career as a full-time trial lawyer and a full-time wife and mom. Ms. Rinaldi is house counsel for Progressive Insurance Company. She practices automobile defense litigation, representing Progressive’s insureds who are being sued following an accident. She also represents Progressive in coverage suits. Her strengths as a trial lawyer were developed in Moot Court while at Washburn Law, in her first job as judicial clerk for a trial court, and in positions at two trial law firms practicing employment law, defense litigation, premise liability, commercial law, and construction law.

"Participating in Moot Court gave me the self-confidence that has allowed me to believe I can do anything I want to, and so far I have," Ms. Rinaldi said.

Tracy Rockney’s work has an impact on the health care available to thousands of people. She is Director of Worldwide Regulatory Affairs for Wyeth Pharmaceuticals in St. Davids, Pennsylvania. In that capacity, she is involved in the distribution of pharmaceuticals for the treatment of major illnesses including cancer. "Although I don’t practice law, it would be very difficult to do the job that I do without a legal background," Ms. Rockney said. "I manage a group of regulatory professionals that is responsible for the post-approval regulatory activities for Wyeth’s oncology, neuroscience, and musculo-skeletal products. Our role is to work with the marketing department on developing appropriate and compliant advertising and promotional campaigns, to develop appropriate labeling for all Wyeth products, and to seek and facilitate approval of new indications for our products with the Food and Drug Administration."

Jill Ann Wolters’ work as Assistant Revisor of Statutes for the State of Kansas has the potential to affect key state policies. "I work closely with the legislators, providing research, offering legal advice, and recommending legislation to update or clarify existing laws," Ms. Wolters said. Her assignments include the State Legislature’s Joint Committee on Corrections and Juvenile Justice Oversight, the House Judiciary Committee, and the House Education Committee. "I draft legislation, committee reports, and floor amendments and provide assistance in legislative procedural matters," Ms. Wolters said. Her interest in legislative work was piqued in 1983, when she had a Washburn Law internship with Mike Hayden, then speaker of the Kansas House of Representatives. A law clerkship in the Revisor of Statutes Office followed in 1986, and she joined the Office staff later that year.

"My solid education in Kansas law and the strong legal research skills I developed at Washburn Law are invaluable in my work," Ms. Wolters said.