

Appellate work lets Keppel flex her research, writing skills

By: MaryBeth Matzek, Special to the Wisconsin Law Journal February 22, 2017 9:50 am



Kathryn Keppel (Staff photo by Kevin Harnack)

Arriving early one day to a class at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Kathryn Keppel was fascinated by the professor talking about constitutional law to the group of students meeting in the same classroom.

Intrigued, she wanted to learn more. Keppel arrived early again to hear the professor talk to his class. Eventually, she took the class and discovered her true calling: working as an appellate attorney.

"It was the natural outgrowth of my political science and English majors," Keppel said. "I am a strong writer, reader and researcher so it suited me very well. I'm also very organized."

After graduating from Marquette University Law School she worked in a small La Crosse law firm for two years before returning in 1989 to Gimbel, Reilly, Guerin & Brown, where she clerked while in law school.

"GRGB needed someone to handle appellate and briefs work and it was a natural fit," Keppel said. "I never left. I find that my writing and research skills fit very well together in this role."

At GRGB, Keppel works on several cases at one time across a wide legal spectrum.

"I've become efficient at appellate law — how things should look, what should be in them, that sort of thing," she said. "I have a lot of variety in my work, which is good since I would be bored to tears if I had to do the same thing day after day."

During her years as an appellate attorney, Keppel has witnessed many changes — particularly how research is gathered. She recalled going to the Marquette University Law Library in the late 1980s and early 1990s to look up federal court decisions.

"Now I just hop online and find things quickly," Keppel said. "It is a lot easier to put briefs together, but you need to always make sure that you are still using the research in context. You can't just grab something because of a keyword search; you need to make sure it's a published opinion and what you are looking for is part of the majority decision."

No matter what the case, Keppel said all of her cases require the same core discipline: "I really need to understand the issues involved and make sure the correct analysis is there," she said.

Wisconsin Law Journal: What makes your work important to you?

Keppel: Growing up I was always the fixer, the organizer, and the person to whom family and friends came for advice. I developed a strong sense of fairness and justice that has carried over to my work as an appellate attorney, especially in criminal appeals. Even great trial court judges can make a mistake, and in my role I have an opportunity to ensure the fairness of the proceedings. GRGB's founding partner, Frank Gimbel, has a framed poster in his office quoting a passage from Deuteronomy: "Justice, justice shall you pursue."

WLJ: Who is your hero in the legal field?

Keppel: Jeff Kaufman, a former GRGB partner. Jeff was an attorney, who was equally gifted in a courtroom, at the negotiating table and in a research library. He was widely recognized as a rising star in the Milwaukee legal community when at age 34 he was diagnosed with ALS. Despite his diagnosis, he continued to work. When he no longer could work as a lawyer, he channeled the skills he used as a lawyer to raise money for ALS research, creating the Wisconsin ALS Chapter's Evening of Hope, a gala still held in Milwaukee each March. Jeff lived for 21 years with ALS, and continued to inspire me and countless others with his determination to find a cure and see his children grow up. In his memory, my GRGB colleagues and I remain active in the Evening of Hope and all of the chapter's fundraising efforts.

WLJ: What do you do outside of work to deal with stress from the office?

Keppel: My favorite stress reliever is to travel to wherever my nephews are competing in their sport of the moment. Watching them play football, basketball, baseball and soccer, learning the skills needed for the game and the importance of teamwork, is true joy ... and a completely different type of stress. I also love to travel, including annually attending a Packers away game in a new city with a group of dear friends. If all else fails, I will re-organize something — my closet, my mom's cluttered desk, my cousin's freezer. There is something about purging junk and putting chaos into order that appeals to my control issues and relaxes me.

WLJ: What's one thing many people get wrong about what you do?

Keppel: When people hear I am a lawyer, they usually picture me in a courtroom cross-examining witnesses and giving fiery arguments like the attorneys they see in movies and on television. Very few non-lawyers understand what is involved in an appellate practice.

WLJ: What's your favorite memory from law school?

Keppel: My most vivid memory is being called upon by Professor Jack Kircher on the first day of Torts class. He scared the heck out of me. The memory that makes me smile is outside the classroom — a trip home to La Crosse over Thanksgiving break, hitting a patch of black ice after pulling off the freeway and my classmate Laurie Mlsna (now O'Brien) attempting to push my car out of a small, muddy ditch while wearing a white rabbit coat. Let's just say the coat did not return to school at the end of the weekend.

WLJ: Is there a certain case that stands out to you?

Keppel: Our firm represented one of the police officers involved in the many lawsuits filed by the families of victims of Jeffrey Dahmer. His deposition was held in the federal courthouse in Judge Terry Evans' courtroom. Judge Evans came to the bench and directed the bailiffs to bring Mr. Dahmer in. I was sitting at the end of counsel table and, as he was escorted to the witness stand, he was less than an arm's length away from me. To this day, I think about how close I was to a serial killer.