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Christine Edwards '83

High Energy, High Impact

By J.J. Schnabel

Christine Edwards '83, one of the most accomplished attorneys in the financial industry today and the newly elected chair of the School of Law's Board of Visitors, has been a rising star since her days as a law student. During those years, she took classes at night while holding down a day job in the credit card department at Sears, Roebuck & Co. in College Park, Md. She recalls fondly that she would sequester herself during lunch with a pile of law books.

While still in law school, she talked her way into a job with Sears' government relations office, a position that had always been held by a licensed attorney. "I had to promise to graduate on time and pass the bar on the first try, which fortunately I did," says Edwards. She spent the next five years working on Capitol Hill, monitoring rules and legislation that impacted Sears' growing financial businesses.

Christine Edwards '83, newly elected chair of the School of Law's Board of Visitors, is one of the financial industry's most accomplished attorneys.

In 1988, when she was still only in her mid-30s, Sears named her general counsel for its expanding Discover credit card operation and later for Discover's parent business, the Wall Street firm Dean Witter. The positions required her to undertake heavy organizational restructuring, major antitrust litigation against Visa and Mastercard, and then a new set of challenges when Sears took Dean Witter public in 1993.

"It was a bit scary for us as a management team to be independent of the big parent company suddenly, but it was also nice to be able to set our own path," she remembers.

Edwards stayed at Dean Witter through its merger with Morgan Stanley and left in 1999 to serve as general counsel for ABN-AMRO North America as the first female general counsel on Wall Street. She was subsequently recruited by incoming Bank One CEO Jamie Dimon to help turn around that troubled company.

In 2003 Edwards became a partner at the large Chicago firm of Winston & Strawn, where she now serves as outside counsel for a variety of boards and financial organizations.

Throughout the course of her high-profile career, Edwards has never lost touch with the School of Law. "I was so happy with the experience that I had there. They teach you how to think creatively; it was out of my comfort zone entirely, and I absolutely loved it," she says.

Edwards joined the law school's Board of Visitors in 1997, and quietly set up a three-year scholarship in 1999. Today, in addition to being the first woman to chair the Board of Visitors, the Chicago resident is also the first chair to live outside Maryland. At board meetings, she is known for lobbying to maintain greater parity between day and evening law school programs. "I've been tireless in supporting that, and I know that it's not easy, but there are people who need a good evening program option—as I did, way back when."