Putting Health First

Joanne Pollak furthers a pioneering career in health law as general counsel at one of the world's top medical institutions.

BY ANN EICHLER KOLAKOWSKI

When she received the Distinguished Graduate Award at the 2006 Honors Banquet, Joanne Pollak J.D. ('76) recalled the first audience she addressed in her professional life: a classroom of first graders in Fort Dix, N.J. It was an unlikely start to a distinguished legal career that, since 1994, has found Pollak serving as vice president and general counsel of the Johns Hopkins Health System/Johns Hopkins Medicine.

After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Dickinson College in the mid-1960s, she got married and taught while studying for a master's in reading disabilities. When the marriage ended a few years later, Pollak and her young daughter left New Jersey for a fresh start in Maryland. "I needed a new career," she says. "so I decided to go to law school."

She juggled part-time studies with full-time teaching jobs. She was intrigued by her students at a psychiatric hospital; that sparked an interest in health care law: "I got very caught up in the students' lives, the legalities of how they came to be at the institution, and under what circumstances they could be released."

Her focus at law school coincided with two influential pieces of legislation—the federal law on certificate of need and a state one on rate setting. "Maryland law school's health care program caught my eye," she says. "They were offering in-depth courses other schools weren't."

With another graduation, in 1976, came a second marriage and a new job—which intersected at the Baltimore office of Piper & Marbury. She met her husband while a summer clerk, and the firm offered her a permanent position. "It was a big step for me," she says of the former. "I was just beginning my legal career, and Mark very much wanted to have a family."

Her secret to balancing career demands with the needs of a family of seven (including a set of triplets)? "Pick the right husband," she laughs, only half in jest.

She found support in her professional life as well. "Mentoring is critical to the success not only of women, but to all good lawyers," she notes. Pollak counts herself fortunate to have had two mentors at Piper & Marbury (now DLA Piper): Roger Redden and Edward Clarke, Jr. Under their guidance, she learned to put together financings for hospitals and universities and write hospital prospectuses, as well as corporate governance and how to deal with hospital-physician relationships. When she left for Hopkins, she was a partner and head of the firm's health care group–and well prepared for the work that lay ahead. "The joy and challenge of working at Hopkins is representing some of the greatest medical minds in the country and the world," she observes. "Part of my job is helping to find appropriate vehicles for expression of this creativity in a highly regulated climate.

"I really learned how to be a lawyer with lots of wonderful role models around me. Because we didn't have the Internet and e-mail, I was allowed to think and learn how to think. I got to sit in on meetings, talk about options, and contribute to decisions that might change over a day or two. My value at Hopkins is incredibly enhanced by the fact that I was taught to do those things."

She worries about the pressures technology and the current economic climate impose on today's graduates. "We're going to have to work hard—both law schools and mentors—in trying to remember that kids have to learn to think and how to come to advise in a reasoned process. It's an invaluable gift that the older generation can give."

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Young attorneys might also follow her lead in public service: Pollak is frequently called to serve on legislative and reform committees, and she also devotes her time to activities such as the American Heart Association, which she served for nearly twenty-five years as a board member, and the law school's Board of Visitors. Her long list of honors also includes three appearances on *The Daily Record*'s list of Top 100 Women in Maryland.

Despite her considerable record of accomplishments, Pollak seems genuinely surprised by the latest addition to it. "I really am very pleased," she says, "because this comes from my peers."

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