For Ellen Moses Heller, this year’s recipient of the Distinguished Graduate Award, the line often blurs between her professional and personal lives. Heller entered law school as a young mother. To look back on her life since then is, for her, a merger of her personal and professional accomplishments.

“The law school has opened many doors to me,” says Heller. “I never thought when I started that it could offer so much. Not just in the sense of a career, but I also have been afforded wonderful relationships because of the law school.” Receiving the award is “a very special honor. I think it is wonderful,” exclaims Heller.

As the first woman circuit court administrative judge, appointed by Chief Judge Robert M. Bell in September 1999, Heller oversees the 8th Circuit. The highest trial court in Baltimore includes civil, criminal, juvenile and family dockets. Heller spouts the Baltimore City population statistics—complete with the numbers of arrests and filings—faster than the latest super computer. Her brain is the vault that holds the details of the population versus the number of judges on the bench. All of the information boils down to an “enormously heavy” caseload.

Heller checks off the accomplishments of her three-and-one-half-year tenure just as quickly as she rattles off statistics. But she does not, by any means, claim them as her own. “With my colleagues and with members of the bar and the legal community, we have instituted a number of new initiatives and programs—across the board—with the bottom line being to try our cases timely and fairly.”

In the civil docket, for example, asbestos cases are now on a court management system, with a newly established electronic filing system. There is a new program in place for the business and technology sector, in which judges will take special courses to keep abreast of the rapidly changing fields. “This is a major advance for the city,” explains Heller.

The civil and criminal docket works under a Differentiated Case Management (DCM) system, which categorizes the big picture: how many cases each judge is assigned, number of postponements, and the category of cases. DCM, Heller notes, is a concept change from attorneys managing the cases to continuous court control of a case. She was instrumental in the design of the DCM systems. “Although we have a long way to go—we have taken significant strides,” Heller says.

Similarly, Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) is considered a concept change—instead of every case going to trial, a mediator is involved in resolving conflicts. The judge has long been a strong supporter of ADR. In 1991, Heller created the Volunteer Attorney Settlement Program of the Circuit Court for Baltimore.
City, in which experienced attorneys volunteer their time to help the judges settle cases. This was a component of her reorganization of the entire civil docket.

In 1999, she initiated a mediation program for certain categories of civil cases, and this past year, a published evaluation credited the program with having a statistically significant impact on resolution of cases prior to trial. "This winter we met and decided to include medical malpractice and other business malpractice cases starting in the spring. Ultimately, we will expand mediation to the business and technology program," says Heller.

"We still have a long way to go," she says. This might well be Heller's motto. It is an apt description for the road she herself has traveled. After obtaining straight As in her first two years of college, Heller dropped out when she was 19 to marry her first husband, who died suddenly in 1982. Heller returned to college and graduated with honors from Johns Hopkins University in 1972. While president of her community association, the work whetted her appetite to make a difference. Heller decided, even with two young boys at home, to attend law school, from which she graduated in 1977, also with honors.

Heller thought her initial foray into law might be in the public sector, health care or education. Prior to her appointment to the bench, from 1977 to 1986, Heller served as assistant attorney general in the Office of the Attorney General, and was deputy chief of the Educational Affairs Division and principal counsel to the Maryland State Department of Education. There she worked on cases involving home schooling, the right to produce One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and the distribution of Gideon Bibles. "It was a wonderful time," recalls Heller. "We accomplished a great deal—affecting real changes."

As her boys grew, so did her family. Heller married Shale D. Stiller, a lawyer with Piper Marbury Rudnick & Wolfe, who had three sons. Today, Heller has three daughters-in-law and two granddaughters who have balanced the gender scales. Though her grandchildren reside in Chicago, Heller is devoted to them and disciplined in visiting. "We try to see them every six weeks and we always have a date for the next time we get together," Heller boasts.

She also is quite devoted to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, a New York-based international rescue and relief organization. She has served on its Board of Directors and as chair for the Africa-Asia Committee and the Former Soviet Union Committee. "This is an outlet that allows me to help other communities," she attests.

She helps the female community in her own backyard as well. "A good deal of my life as a judge has been spent sentencing," says Heller who does still sit, primarily on civil and criminal cases. Heller has been involved with the Maryland Women's Judges Task Force for Women in Prison since 1993. The task force just launched a new program, Tamar's Children, that allows incarcerated women to stay with their children. The University of Maryland Hospital provides prenatal and postnatal care and parenting classes. The women in the program also receive job training and drug treatment in a structured setting. The goal is for women and children to move into transitional housing six months after birth of the baby.

Heller's hand in civic and community affairs touches her professionally and personally—and the School of Law has been the catalyst. "I feel so positive about the law school," says Heller. "I'm more proud of the School of Law than receiving this award—and I'm amazed I'm saying this. I was frightened to death when I first entered, intimidated by everyone and everything, I wasn't even sure I would finish. But I did. First the attorney general's office and now the judge's bench. All of this has happened because of law school."

And a bit of hard work and perseverance of her own.