n a cool April day in 1966, Chief Justice Earl Warren came to the School of Law to scold the legal profession.

Warren, who is perhaps best remembered for his candor and pugnacity, visited the school that day to dedicate its new Lane Hall building on Baltimore Street. With Gov. Millard Tawes and dozens of University and law school leaders in the audience, the burly Supreme Court legend took the podium like a headmaster on graduation day. A mix of admonishment and encouragement were on his mind.

“Our legal institutions have not adequately responded to the demands of the times,” Warren said. The nations’ law schools, he asserted, should strive to become “laboratories experimenting in ideas and in the possible application of theories of adversary justice.”

Flash forward to the 1990s. A lone student walks through the dim and narrow corridors of the law clinic on the top floor of Lane Hall. He’s looking for a place to conduct a settlement conference between his client and an opponent. Meanwhile, Maryland’s secretary of the environment waits patiently in the hallway. His office has been involved in the same case, and the settlement must go well.

“I can’t find any room to do this conference,” the student says, exasperated. The group eventually heads down to the student lounge on the first floor of the 32-year-old building. There, among coffee cups and conversation, the parties reach an agreement.

If only architecture could be as adaptable as a lawyer!

When architects designed the law school building in the 1960s, they had little idea what would take place in the coming years in legal education. The same uncertainty holds true for any building. Some cathedrals end up as homeless shelters, and banks now house nightclubs. But the words of Chief Justice Warren reverberate in ways beyond those he could imagine.

Indeed, legal education has become a laboratory for exploring the boundaries of conflict, and law students do engage in the practical application of their coursework. In 1998, the School of Law is in the forefront of implementing Warren’s concept of legal education.

From the day he started the job nearly six years ago, Dean Donald G. Gifford has served as the School of Law’s own “Chief” regarding the promotion of legal education. Like Warren, Gifford has profound faith in the efficacy of teaching law by practicing law. Now, in 1998, working behind the scenes and in the public forum of the Critical Moment fundraising campaign, Gifford has resolved to make the law building a reflection of his desire to do more and do better for the legal profession (see sidebar, page 4).

Meet with the dean during a typically busy Friday, and he’ll quickly make his case for a new and improved building, sounding like the trial lawyer he was in an earlier life:

“So much has changed about the law and legal education in the last 30 years,” Gifford says. “There are times as many individual course titles as there were in 1968. The library has seven times as many books. Just look at clinical education then: it was barely a speck of what we do now. We now have 16 full-time faculty members supervising students engaged in real legal work in areas ranging from environmental law, to health care law, to technology law, to working with AIDS patients and representing criminal defendants. We provide more than $3 million in free legal services every year. We’re nationally ranked in environmental and health care law, and our clinical approach receives praise from scholars and practitioners everywhere. That level of training and service requires interaction between all sides—teachers and students, students and clients, students and opposing counsel. You have to have space for that to happen.”
And then there’s the new technology. Not even NASA had PCs in the ‘60s, let alone massive databases, networks, CD-ROMs, and distance learning.

“All of us here can foresee a day when every student will have a laptop, and the professor will use an interactive system to tie all of the computers together,” Gifford explains. “When the professor cites a case, she’ll press a key and it will show up on every laptop in the room. And that’s just the beginning.”

As enthusiastic as Gifford is, there is an urgency to his message. His lobbying efforts, which have taken him to the Statehouse dozens of times as well as to alumni groups across the country, have resulted in a limited-time offer that would give Earl Warren pause. Basically, the school has until June 1999 to raise a record-shattering $8 million from alumni and friends. If it does that, the state has committed to more than triple that amount, providing $28.4 million, which will pay for a good portion of the $38 million project.

Prominent alumni already are lining up behind the dean in support of this landmark effort. Frank Burch ’74, chairman of Piper and Marbury and chair of the School of Law Building Campaign, says the new building will confirm the quality of the school for a new generation of lawyers and their teachers.

“The alumni believe that the law school has always provided a high-quality, practical education—it’s strong across all substantive areas,” Burch says. “What it lacks is a building that shows off the greatness we all know is in there. This is a turning point for us as graduates. We need to get this building done.”

Paul Bekman ’71, campaign co-chair, partner in the law firm of Israelson, Salsbury, Clements and Bekman, and president of the Maryland State Bar Association, agrees.

“The campaign will help the physical plant to complement the quality instruction, curriculum and administration,” Bekman says. “It will be a major factor in putting the law school in its place as one of the top law schools in the country.”

So far, support for the project appears to be wide and deep. One of the goals of the faculty, for instance, is for every faculty member to make a pledge. Already, faculty members have exceeded the original $250,000 goal.

Gifford describes the alumni as exceptionally proud of the institution where their careers, and even their adult lives, got off to good starts. Their Baltimore Street memories may be good ones (with a few office-hours nightmares thrown in, of course), but they’re not so attached to the building that they can’t imagine something new and much better in its place.

“They look around the state and they see that leaders of business, government, philanthropy, and bench and bar are graduates of their school,” says Gifford. “They hear from us that the law school and its 8,000 active graduates generated an incredible $1.5 billion in personal income and consumer activity last year alone. They’re excited about these things. They know we’ve had the students and teachers to rival the best law schools in the country, and I think there’s a collective sense that it’s about time we had the bricks and mortar to prove it.”

Gifford notes with pride that John K. Martin, vice chancellor for advancement of the University System of Maryland, has called the law school “a diamond in a cardboard box.”

Proof is what any lawyer seeks when he prepares for trial. It’s the same with potential students and educators when they’re considering law school. In the past three decades, higher education—and in particular the professions of medicine and law—have become remarkably market-driven, boldly competitive and intent on focused on the experience of learning and practice. The old model of the public university, where the state paid for everything and the low bid always won, is officially gone. Self-sufficiency rules.

What that means for the University of Maryland School of Law is a higher standard that cannot be solely paid for by Annapolis. “Our state revenues represent only a small portion of our budget,” Gifford explains. “The rest of it we raise ourselves from alumni, philanthropic organizations, tuition, contracts and grants. It says a lot about the school that just when state funding began to fall precipitously back in the late ‘70s and early ‘90s, our faculty and programs began to shine most prominently.”

In the past five years the school has entered the top echelons of recognition for its programs in areas such as law and health care, business law, environmental law and clinical education. That trend will continue. The feeling throughout the school is that its best years are ahead. Gifford explains that the quality of the student body is excellent, and young scholars are constantly knocking on the door because they’ve heard it’s a great place to teach and research. The school’s leadership has stayed the course in terms of class size since the ‘70s because it knows that a bigger school won’t make for a better school.

The question is, how do you achieve your best when you don’t look your best?

“When this building was opened in 1966, it was perfectly fine for teaching law,” Gifford says, walking through the maze of makeshift offices in the clinic. “But over the years we wanted more than just book learning from our lawyers, we wanted them to hit the ground running. Our school believed in that ideal and has worked very hard to achieve it. I don’t see any reason to stop now.”

Somewhere, Chief Justice Warren just signed the concurring opinion.