Ellen Moses Heller never had any intention of sitting on the bench. But nearly 23 years after graduating with honors from the University of Maryland School of Law, she can't imagine doing anything else.

"I was totally intimidated by law school," recalls Heller, a lifelong resident of Baltimore who, in September, was appointed administrative judge of the Circuit Court for Baltimore City. "There I was in my mid-30s, the mother of two young boys, feeling like a senior citizen compared to all the other young students who were fresh out of undergraduate school," she explains with a laugh. "I was interested in public law, particularly health and education, but never aspired to be a judge. My career has taken me way beyond what I ever thought I would do. When I came on the bench, my legal world broadened tremendously. It continues to be a very satisfying experience."

Heller was appointed to the Baltimore bench in 1986 by then-Gov. Harry R. Hughes. Her most recent appointment, as administrative judge, follows an extremely successful six-year term as the judge in charge of the city's civil docket. Leading a lengthy list of accomplishments is Heller's impressive transformation of the civil litigation process in Baltimore's Circuit Court. Prior to her leadership, the city's civil cases took more than two years to go to trial via a process that was plagued with inefficiencies. Heller skillfully crafted a civil docket program that eliminated—within a year—a backlog of more than 4,500 cases awaiting trial. She implemented computerized scheduling, streamlined procedures, developed a volunteer attorney settlement program, and initiated a court-sponsored mediation program to
The reforms that Heller put into place continue to prove their effectiveness. Today, most cases on Baltimore’s civil docket, the largest in Maryland, are heard within a year of filing. It is anticipated that the city’s criminal docket will undergo a similar transformation with Heller as administrative judge. After just four months of Heller’s leadership, the criminal docket is operating at its highest level of efficiency since 1996. “We’re hearing cases well within the 180-day time frame,” she explains. Her attention is now focused on managing a 10-year backlog of 19,000 asbestos cases—12,500 of which remain active.

Heller says she is confident that Baltimore’s Circuit Court can and will become a model for urban courts across the country. She credits any current and soon-to-come improvements to the team of 30 judges who oversee the city’s criminal, civil, family and juvenile courts. “I am fortunate to have the support of the bench,” she states. “We’re working as a team, and I have great confidence that the judges and I together will meet any challenges.”

Associate Judge Kathleen O’Ferrall Friedman ’66 praises Heller as an excellent team builder who is doubly gifted as an idea person and a doer. “Judge Heller is a clear and creative thinker. She’s the kind of person who can grasp the essence of a problem, come up with ideas to solve it, and then figure out how to implement change.” Associate Judge Clifton Gordy ’73 agrees. “Judge Heller is a pleasure to work with. She’s a wonderful judge and definitely the right woman at the right time for this job.”

Heller somehow finds time to apply her special skills and talents to a variety of worthy endeavors related to professional and personal interests. She is actively involved with numerous law organizations, including the Maryland State Bar Association, Maryland Alternative Dispute Resolution Commission, Maryland Circuit Judges Association, and Maryland Women Judges Task Force on Women in Prison. Heller serves on the Board of Directors of the Judicial Institute of Maryland and on the Judicial Administration Committee for the Bar Association of Baltimore City. She is the director of the Volunteer Attorney Settlement Program of the Circuit Court for Baltimore City, a program she created in 1991 that has grown to include nearly 100 participating attorneys.

In addition, Heller continues to serve (since 1991) on the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Inc., a New York-based international rescue and relief organization. She chairs the Former Soviet Union Committee, having previously chaired the Africa-Asia Committee. Heller also serves on the Board of Directors of the Girl Scouts of Central Maryland and is a member of the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars Advisory Council.

Since 1992, Heller has served on the Board of Visitors for the University of Maryland School of Law. She enjoys her continued involvement with the law school, keeping in touch with several of her former professors and serving as an adjunct professor from 1984 until 1993, teaching a law and education seminar and a course on federal jurisdiction. In honor of her first husband, a Baltimore pediatrician and genetics expert, Heller established The Dr. Richard H. Heller Fund to support lectures, fellowships and activities related to legal and ethical issues in health care, an area of study that continues to interest her. Karen Rothenberg, who directed the Law and Health Care Program before being named interim dean, notes that “I have always admired Judge Heller’s sense of fairness and her passion for social justice. Personally, it has meant so much to me that she has been such a strong supporter of the Law and Health Care Program.”

Heller has no regrets about her midlife decision to study law—a decision greatly influenced by her own experiences as an active volunteer in her neighborhood association and by her younger sister, now a practicing attorney in New York. “Raising a family and going to law school was grueling,” she admits. “I almost dropped out at one point but managed somehow to make it through. And when the process was over, my whole world was opened up to new ideas.”

After graduation, Heller worked for nearly a decade at the Office of the Attorney General as deputy chief of the Educational Affairs Division, as principal counsel for the Maryland State Department of Education, and assistant attorney general. “I was fortunate to work with wonderful senior attorneys who became teachers and mentors,” recalls Heller. “In my first year at the attorney general’s office, I found myself sitting at the counsel table of the Supreme Court, contributing to a case concerning the rights of disabled individuals,” she continues. “Each case I worked on—whether it involved distribution of Gideon Bibles or a school’s right to produce One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest—showed me more and more how the law is the protector of individual rights and how it affects public policy.”

Given her many professional achievements, it’s not surprising that Heller was recognized in 1997 and 1999 as one of Maryland’s Top 100 Women by The Daily Record. Ask her which of her numerous accolades and accomplishments means the most, however, and Heller’s reply reveals the humility and principles that have no doubt contributed to her success. “I’m fortunate to have a wonderful family and still have a very satisfying career.” Heller is married to Shale D. Stiller, a lawyer with Piper, Marbury, Rudnick & Wolfe, and adjunct professor at the School of Law. Between them, they have five sons—not a lawyer among them—and one “absolutely adorable” grandchild.