



Sandy Wirtel (J.D. '92)

ALUMNA FINDS HER CALLING IN JUVENILE COURT

The law school's first Child and Family Services Clinic leader improves the lives of children — and the family court system — with her pro bono work

BY SUZANNE KING

Sandra J. "Sandy" Wirtel had just entered law school at UMKC in 1990 when she was diagnosed with a rare form of breast cancer. Suddenly, at 23, practicing real estate law — the path she had mapped out for herself before enrolling — seemed a lot less important.

Wirtel stayed in school. Despite spending the first year and a half juggling homework with chemo, she graduated with her class in 1992 and was admitted to the bar the same year. Yet while classmates were pursuing clerkships and internships they hoped would place them on straight career trajectories, Wirtel was still hoping to discover what her legal passion would be.

"People were so competitive about grades and so into loving the law," she says. "But I wasn't."

That began to change during her last year in law school, when she enrolled in Family Law and the UMKC Legal Aid Clinic. After a year in the clinic defending young people who were facing charges in Jackson County's Juvenile Court, Wirtel found her true calling.

"There was finally some meaning to what I had been working hard to do," Wirtel recalls. "I could be a lawyer who helped kids."

For almost three decades that's what she's been doing.

Wirtel, who practices at Spencer Fane, is one of Kansas City's most experienced family law attorneys, representing parents and children in the family court system. She was the first professor to lead the Law School's Child and Family Services Clinic in 2000, and is a constant force to improve the process for children caught in the court system.

"She's a warrior in the courtroom and she's also very good at just getting down to brass tacks," says Lori L. Stipp (J.D. '86), a family court juvenile officer and a longtime colleague and friend of Wirtel's. "She's excellent at just being very forthright and stepping forward to speak her mind when something is not working right."

Spencer Fane hired Wirtel to handle the pro bono cases that its partners and associates were obligated to accept under Jackson County's unique juvenile appointment system.

In addition to her years of experience practicing family law, colleagues say, Wirtel has a natural gift for helping her clients get through very difficult circumstances.

"She's blunt, but not disrespectful," says Megan Roth (J.D. '03), who handles pro bono cases for Shook, Hardy & Bacon in Kansas City and was a student in the family law clinic when Wirtel was teaching there. "When dealing with clients, she's always professional and always empathetic."

Being empathetic is one of Wirtel's best gifts, Roth says, and one of the important things Wirtel taught her.

"We all have so many clients and it's hard to have much face-to-face time," Roth says. "When you do have that time, you've got to — in a very short period of time — get your client to listen to you and believe what you're saying and advising them to do."

Today, as Wirtel works from home, worried about the clients she can no longer see face-to-face because of the COVID-19 pandemic, she has had to put things into perspective all over again.

Recently, she learned that cancer has returned. Metastatic breast cancer is now in her bones. Wirtel isn't wavering about what she wants to do, though. Her calling hasn't changed, she says, and she hopes to spend the years she has left helping the kids who wind up in the family court system.

"I feel strongly that good quality parent representation helps kids," Wirtel says. "I want to feel like what I did mattered because a family was impacted, hopefully in a positive way."



Sandy Wirtel on Adoption Day, holding one of her youngest clients