

by Jeff Mortimer

When she was a graduate student in speech at the University of Michigan, a Rackham Prize Fellowship made it possible for Joan B. Kessler to finish her PhD in two years, which also made it possible for her to leave Ann Arbor along with her husband Warren (Skip) Kessler when he graduated from the University of Michigan Law School in 1973. She eventually earned a law degree herself, and they're now partners in the Los Angeles firm of Kessler & Kessler, A Law Corporation.

Her family's U-M roots are more than a century old: her great uncle earned a law degree at Michigan in 1906, her father followed suit with BA and JD degrees and her aunt, uncle and sister are also graduates of various programs at Michigan. "There was no question in my mind when I was growing up that I would go to the University of Michigan," she says. "I didn't even apply to any other school. It was the realization of a lifelong dream to attend there, to follow in the family tradition."

Kessler's dissertation compared and analyzed the decision-making processes of six versus twelve member juries. The dissertation research was cited twice by the US Supreme Court in support of reducing jury size for certain cases. "Because of my interest in how juries work and after serving as a consultant to lawyers, it was not surprising that I would eventually go to law school," says Kessler.

Kessler has not forgotten the paucity of female mentors she encountered while accomplishing her academic goals. To remedy that situation, and to express her ongoing gratitude to Rackham for its assistance, she followed in another family tradition—giving back to the University—by establishing the Joan B. Kessler Fund for Women Graduate Students in 2003.

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Photo by Skip Kessler

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women coming up," she says, "and as a teacher, as a professor, and now as a lawyer, I have devoted a lot of time and energy to that. In that regard, I decided to establish an award to assist women graduate students in research-related travel and other dissertation-related expenses that may not be covered by another source."

The \$2,500 Joan B. Kessler Award is given annually on her birthday, which is also the occasion of efforts to grow the Fund. She has invited women friends and professional colleagues to celebratory luncheons and asked that they make donations to her Fund at Rackham. The first such affair raised more than \$10,000, to which she and her husband added their own gift of \$25,000. She raised more than \$15,000 at a birthday celebration this year bringing the total Joan B. Kessler Award Fund to over \$60,000.

"I think that women have a responsibility to help young women coming up in the professional ranks achieve their goals," she says, "and

one thing this shows is you don't have to give a million to have an impact. We're not in a position to do that, but we were in a position to give back and be supportive, and the three women who have gotten these awards so far are tremendously capable women who just needed a little help."

It also shows that there's room for creativity in philanthropy. "You don't just have to give a donation," Kessler says. "You can use a birthday party or an anniversary or any life milestone as a cause for celebration and as a way to encourage others to donate to Rackham."

The passage of the years doesn't just bring the resources to help; it can also bring the wisdom spawned by a longer perspective. "As you get older," she says, "the personal gifts one might receive are not as meaningful as are donations in your honor to a cause like the Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan, which is very close to my heart." ■