PERSON OF THE YEAR:
HAROLD J. KRENT

IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law’s outgoing dean looks ahead
When Harold J. Krent was named dean of IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law in 2003 he was no stranger to running the school. He became interim dean in 2002 after former dean Henry H. Perritt Jr. announced he would run for the U.S. House of Representatives. Krent had previously served as associate dean since 1997 before joining the faculty in 1994.

In his position, Krent has overcome the school’s financial hardship by adapting the curriculum and programs to keep up with the legal profession’s ever-changing future.

Through the ups and downs, Krent has also worked to continually provide students with beneficial legal training, especially through pro bono efforts.

“You want to have the ability to use whatever tools you have to help others understand their rights, talk about current events or go to court and actually represent people,” Krent said.

Over the last year, Krent was instrumental in helping develop a spring break trip to Texas where students prepared women and children with the first steps of claiming asylum.

He also worked alongside students and alumni in developing a legal triage program to help attorneys prioritize resources for those facing eviction.

Finally, he helped spearhead an effort among the American Bar Association’s Center for Innovation, a team from IIT Institute of Design, Chicago-Kent law school students and students from Tulane University School of Law in New Orleans to create a tool to help the New Orleans Police Department convey Miranda rights in Spanish.
THE YEAR:
KRENT
Krent was recognized for those efforts by being named the 2018 Leonard Jay Schrager Award of Excellence recipient, an award presented by The Chicago Bar Foundation. The award recognizes attorneys who work in academic fields and make significant pro bono contributions.

Thomas A. Demetrio, a 1973 Chicago-Kent graduate, co-chair of the law school’s board of overseers and partner at Corboy & Demetrio, said Krent’s efforts to show students the importance of pro bono work early on in their legal careers are vital to their success.

“Krent said the law school has recently seen an overall increase in law school applications in what he refers to as a Trump bump.”

For Krent, as he looks back on his 15 years as dean while preparing to step down in 2019, helping others is one way he is able to use what he has learned throughout his career and still be able to work with students.

“It’s a way that I can use my skills for someone who can’t afford a lawyer and I can give them a chance,” Krent said.

STARTING OUT
Growing up in Cleveland in the 1960s, Krent always had the prospect of practicing law in the back of his mind.

“Certainly there was rioting in the streets but there were also issues of change, the Peace Corps, the civil rights movement and it became very clear law was a tool to help attain social goals,” Krent said.

He earned a bachelor’s degree at Princeton University and taught history for a short time before going to law school.

Krent has always had an interest in what has happened in the past and how society can learn from it. Even now he still “reads all sorts of history” books and publications when he finds time.

After earning his law degree in 1982 at New York University School of Law, Krent clerked for the late U.S. District judge William H. Timbers.

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He then worked for the appellate staff in the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Division.

When deciding to come to Chicago-Kent, Krent said a colleague told him “you could be happy for your career here.”

And while he did not expect to be dean when he first arrived, he was put on that path rather quickly.

When Krent first took over as dean Chicago-Kent was the “cash cow university” for at least the first eight years. Now, given financial pressures on law schools across the country, the school remains “at the margins.”

“That has changed a lot of the way the school functions,” Krent said. He said because there has been less expansion from larger firms given increased technology and their own economic pressures, the school has had to think more critically about the new areas of growth in the legal field such as legal technology, human relations and compliance departments.

Even with the recognition that the school is not as financially stable as it was a decade ago, Krent maintains the students remain the No. 1 priority.

“We try to make sure that students stay at the center which means at times faculty don’t have as many support staff as they used to,” he said. Krent said the law school has recently seen an overall increase in law school applications in what he refers to as a “Trump bump.”

He said since President Donald J. Trump was elected more students are interested in becoming lawyers given some of his policies and stances on particular issues, such as immigration.

Chicago-Kent saw a 15-percent increase in student applications last year, he said.

Demetrio said Krent has been successful at not only allocating resources appropriately but ensuring the school is adequately funded in order to remain competitive.

“A dean of a law school has to be able to stand tall and firm [when advocating a budget]. We are definitely going to miss that part of Hal’s contributions to the law school,” Demetrio said.

While the number of faculty has dwindled some, Krent said he is immensely proud of the work the faculty who is on board has done, noting a handful of legal writing awards and lifetime achievement awards given to various faculty members.

“It’s very gratifying to see that the people you value are valued outside,” he said.

Matthew P. Walsh II, a 1992 Chicago-Kent graduate and partner at Hinshaw & Culbertson, said while Krent was not dean when he was in school he has been able to develop both a collegial relationship and friendship with him.

He said he is impressed with Krent’s ability to navigate the law school through a difficult time in the legal profession.

Walsh said he believes Krent has done so by listening to his various constituencies and not being afraid to reach out to people he respects for advice and guidance.

“The environment for lawyers has changed so much in the last 15 years,” Walsh said. “It’s pretty impressive that he has been able to not only maintain the respect of the faculty but the respect and support of the alumni during some interesting times.”

KEEPING BUSY UNTIL THE END
As Krent finishes up his time as dean he has continued to encourage students to help others less fortunate through pro bono efforts.

To 2013 Chicago-Kent graduate and Denver immigration attorney Samantha D. Lloyd, Krent’s efforts to get students involved in impactful pro bono projects is admirable.

“He tries to be a mentor to students and leads by example,” Lloyd said.

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“CIVIL MINDEDNESS CAN BE CONTAGIOUS”

Working alongside I.V. Ashton, a 1998 Chicago-Kent graduate and founder of LegalServer, as well as current students the group is in the process of developing a legal triage program for people going through the eviction process who can’t afford a lawyer.  

“The idea would be you’d fill out a form, indicate when the eviction would be, what type of housing you’re in, if you have dependants, heat in the building, to get the whole picture and then the technology can assess the magnitude of harm and the effectiveness of a lawyer,” Krent said.

Krent said Ashton came to him with a similar idea and the two were able to reconceptualize it to what it is now. After roughly two years of work, the group is nearing a prototype, he said.

Ashton said the project highlights Krent’s ability to stress the importance of being adaptable and entrepreneurial given the uncertainty of the legal field.

“That’s a huge, huge skill because you can’t necessarily teach something that hasn’t been invented yet,” Ashton said. “Learning stuff in a classroom is one thing but going out and actually having to think what the challenges are and the risks are, having to frame the problem is really great.”

Krent was also involved in planning a spring break program this past year where 13 students went to Dilley, Texas, to help prepare women and children with the first steps in seeking asylum in the United States.

While in Texas, the students worked 13-hour days and performed 270 intake interviews and 302 credible fear interviews where they would listen to the reasons why the detainees did not want to return to their home countries.

Lloyd, who had previously been to the facility and had experience as an immigration attorney, also attended the trip.

After the group came back, Krent encouraged them to continue their efforts. Now the program is an official class at the law school worth two credit hours. In addition, the students plan to return to the facility in January.

“Civic mindedness can be contagious,” Krent said. “This is a good example of where you can just get a little bit of help outside, channel momentum and end up with some great success and change, at least at the margin.”

Lloyd said she was taken aback by how supportive Krent was to the program, especially considering the political connotations and anti-immigrant feelings in some areas of the country such an opportunity could have.

“When I was in law school he seemed like this celebrity but he’s just down to earth and easy to talk to and I was just really blown away by him and his dedication,” she said.

Kathleen McDonough, a graduate of Chicago-Kent and attorney at Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Dicker, said she doesn’t know how he finds the time to prioritize these projects in the way he does.

“He will be very missed next year,” she said.

Last summer, the American Bar Association’s Center for Innovation partnered with students from the computer science, design and law schools at the Illinois Institute of Technology to develop a tool to better help the New Orleans Police Department give Miranda warnings in Spanish.

Jeremy Alexis, senior lecturer at IIT Institute of Design who helped oversee the project, said Krent provided “quite a bit of counsel” and helped the team get in touch with the necessary people in order to complete the project.

The team developed laminated cards with images explaining the Miranda warnings in addition to a recording of the warning in Spanish. Officers also have a Spanish-language video of the warnings in their police cars.

Krent said the program makes a difference for both police officers and those who are being questioned by police.

“You have one group who understands their rights more clearly without any kind of question but it also gives law enforcement officers more confidence to give a warning,” he said.

Throughout the entirety of his time as dean Krent has also involved students in the cases he’s worked on whether they be before the Illinois Supreme Court or the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 2003, Krent argued before the U.S. Supreme Court in U.S. Postal Service v. Flamingo Industries Ltd., No. 02-1290. The case involved whether private citizens and businesses could sue the U.S. Postal Service under federal antitrust laws.

While the outcome was not what Krent had hoped for he’ll likely remember the experience for a lifetime.

Krent has two keepsakes from the occasion: A painting hanging in a room in his office of him standing at the podium before the justices and a quill given to lawyers who argue before the Supreme Court.

With the assistance of students, Krent has also filed amicus briefs in three Supreme Court cases: Southern Union v. United States; Alvarez v. Smith and Dolan v. United States Postal Service.

WHAT’S NEXT
When asked what comes next after his time as dean is over Krent was quick to answer.

“The prospect of a sabbatical and a subsequent return to the classroom are alluring, but never say never if an unexpected opportunity arises,” he said.

While he may not entirely know what he’ll be doing at the end of his term he hopes to leave the law school in a financially stable place where students can continue to take advantage of meaningful opportunities.

“I’m hoping I can leave the school in as stable an economic environment as I can which means both fundraising and continually being successful at attracting students with our distinctive programs,” he said.

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Photography: Lisa Predko