

## Teacher finds new way to help special-needs kids — as an attorney

By Kevin Davis  
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Merilee Waters often told her high school history students about her dream to go to law school some day — till they finally dared her to quit talking about it and just do it.

"I said that I always wanted to go to law school, and I probably said it too many times," says Ms. Waters, 44, who taught for 15 years, with an emphasis in special education. "It was a dream that was always stuck in the back of my head somewhere."

Ms. Waters took the Law School Admissions Test and scored high; she soon had offers from several schools. She chose John Marshall Law School in Chicago, which had a part-time evening program and offered scholarship money.

Since graduating in 2007, Ms. Waters has turned her passion for working with children with special needs to becoming their legal advocate. The work she does on behalf of students with special needs is all pro bono; she pays the bills by doing trusts and estate law.

While teaching at Morton West High School in Berwyn, Ms. Waters occasionally encountered students who weren't doing well academically and she wanted to understand why.

"I realized there were a lot of kids who needed more than I had to give them," says Ms. Waters, who lives and works in Skokie. "I was trying to find out why I wasn't connecting."

She went back to school to earn a master's degree in special education from Dominican University in River Forest while teaching full time. But she wanted to do more outside the classroom. She found many parents were unaware that their children were entitled to special medical and educational accommodations in school and often needed someone to fight for those rights on their behalf.

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Her husband is also a high school teacher; they have two children. She found that teaching while attending law school at night wasn't easy. "I studied for the bar at my kitchen table with the dog and kids and husband all around me all the time," she says. "They were great."

While older than most of the students in her class, Ms. Waters was not alone. William Powers, associate dean for admissions and student affairs at John Marshall, says about 20% of students are four or more years out of college and include all kinds of professionals.

"Oftentimes, we'll see people come back to school to meld what they're doing with a law degree," he says.

At John Marshall, Ms. Waters became friends with attorney Kevin Hull of Chicago-based Hull Partners Ltd. At



the time, he worked in the alumni relations office, where she helped out. "One of the first things I saw in her was that focus, that ambition, that desire to do what she wanted to do," he says. "She did not want to do this for the money, but to help these kids who needed it."

After law school, Ms. Waters got a job with the Illinois Appellate Court. A year-and-a-half later, she decided to strike out on her own.

As a volunteer, she offers free legal services through Health and Disability Advocates, a group that seeks health care access for children, the poor and elderly. The cases involve making sure children receive the accommodations they are entitled to under the law, and that parents have access to see and evaluate their child's learning environment.

"There is a real need for advocates. There are so many people who can't afford an attorney, and you have a huge need in the city," she says.

She's finding a lot of satisfaction in this side of her second career.

"I'm not getting any younger," she says. "I want to be an advocate. To me, it's all about helping the kids and figuring out how to do it."

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