

Recognizing outstanding service

2024 School of Law awards honor Tanya D. Woods, David Baker, Neil Williams, and Elizabeth Rochford

BY LIZ MILLER AND KELSEY SCHAGEMANN

IN A SCHOOL KNOWN FOR turning out graduates who pay it forward, these individuals stand out as particularly strong symbols of service. Here are the recipients of the 2024 Loyola University Chicago School of Law alumni awards, which will be presented at the Reunion and Alumni Awards Dinner on Saturday, September 14. (Visit LUC.edu/law/reunion to learn more about the event.)



Woods serves on the School of Law's Alumni Board of Governors and has worked as an adjunct professor.

“When I say I’m a ‘servant leader,’ I really mean it. I’m also a firm believer that you need to give back to the places that pour into you.”

Tanya D. Woods (JD '13)

ST. ROBERT BELLARMINA AWARD

The St. Robert Bellarmine Award recognizes a graduate who earned a JD within the past 15 years for distinguished service to the community, to the legal profession, and to the School of Law.

TANYA D. WOODS (JD '13) takes big risks because she has big dreams. When she started law school, Woods was a 39-year-old

widowed mother of two looking to channel a sense of purpose and desire to make a difference. “Loyola welcomed me with open

arms,” Woods says. “The learning and spiritual environments were everything I hoped for.”

But that didn't mean it was easy. Although Woods struggled academically, she leaned enthusiastically into experiential learning opportunities. She also found support from faculty mentors who encouraged her to think beyond graduation. How, they asked, was

she planning to leverage her law school education and natural leadership skills?

The answer to that question is evident in Woods's impressive post-law-school resume. After clerking for the Honorable Virginia Kendall (JD '92) and working for a business immigration law firm, Woods took a leap of faith and joined the Westside

Justice Center as executive director in 2016. The nascent nonprofit wasn't able to pay Woods for three months, but in her gut, the move felt right.

Located in Garfield Park, Westside Justice Center makes an impact through direct legal services, community navigation support, and advocacy efforts. The center is also one of the founding organizations and a grant administrator of Illinois Access to Justice, a statewide network of legal and community services.

“We launched this initiative with our partner, the Resurrection Project in Pilsen, because we saw a need in both the Black and Brown communities,” Woods says. “Too many of our people were being stopped from lawful employment because of something in their background or status.”

This take-action philosophy is typical for Woods. A certified mediator, Woods runs a solo law practice, serves as a member of the Chicago Board of Education, and holds a real estate broker's license.

“When I say I'm a 'servant leader,' I really mean it, like, 'How am I serving others?’” Woods says. “I'm also a firm believer that you need to give back to the places that pour into you.”

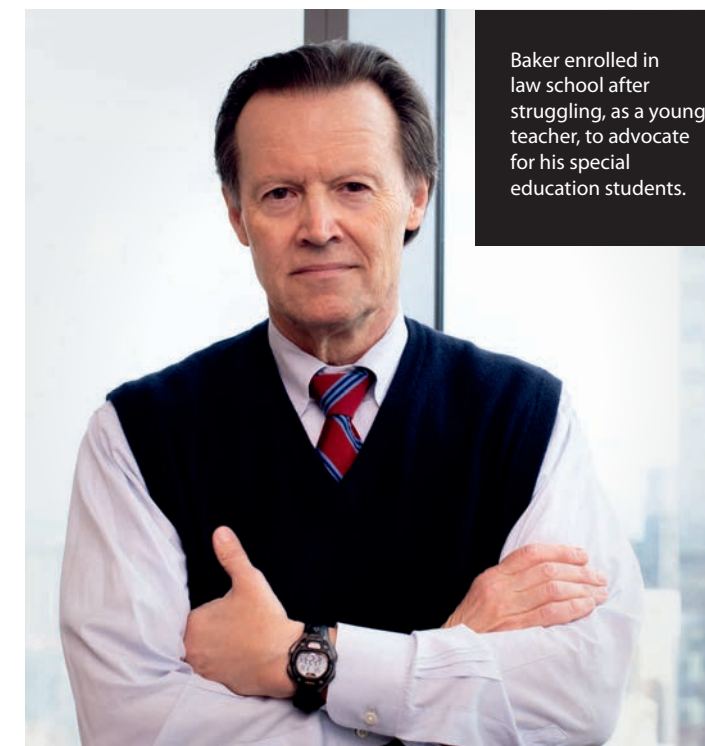
To that end, Woods serves on the School of Law's Alumni Board of Governors and has worked as an adjunct professor and volunteer judge for coaching and mediation competitions.

“The pleasant surprise for many of us who went to Loyola to earn a law degree and get a job is that we came out with so much more,” Woods says. “We're better people. We're better mentors. We are advisors. We are leaders.”
—KS

David Baker (JD '79)

FRANCIS J. ROONEY/ST. THOMAS MORE AWARD

The Francis J. Rooney/St. Thomas More Award recognizes continuous, outstanding loyalty and dedicated service to the School of Law.



Baker enrolled in law school after struggling, as a young teacher, to advocate for his special education students.

WHEN DAVID BAKER (JD '79)

visited an adolescent psych ward for a pro bono project in 2019, he was alarmed to learn that many of the patients had been victims of bullying. In fact, Baker couldn't stop thinking about it. As he mulled possible solutions to this crisis, Baker thought of someone who could help: Diane Geraghty, director of the School of Law's Civitas ChildLaw Center.

Baker contacted his former mentor and proposed a new initiative. Thanks to Baker's generous funding and passionate involvement, the Civitas ChildLaw Center's Anti-Bullying Program launched four years ago. The program offers free legal services for children experiencing bullying and supports anti-bullying policies and systemic reform.

Those who know Baker aren't surprised by that story; Baker has never been satisfied with the status quo. He enrolled at Loyola Law after struggling, as a young teacher, to advocate for his special education students. “I thought maybe people would take me more seriously if I was a lawyer,” Baker says.

During law school, Baker served as an editor for the *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* and applied himself academically. “Loyola was very good at providing a diverse curriculum and strong foundation,” Baker recalls. He joined McDermott Will & Emery full time at the beginning of his third year.

Forty-five years later, Baker is still with the firm; he is the partner in charge of estate, trust,

and guardianship controversy, the practice group he founded. Baker's responsibilities align with his abiding interest in improving people's lives. “More often than not, this work has a material impact on families,” Baker says. “The human scope of it is something that I've always enjoyed.”

Baker was inspired to write his nonfiction book, *Death Is No Excuse*, after speaking with clients who felt mystified by topics such as probate, estate planning, life insurance, and guardianship. The book also digs into the legal complexities around marriage, surrogacy, elder care, and more.

A prolific writer, Baker is also the author of *Patriot Acts*, a political satire and legal thriller featuring a lawyer protagonist. “It's very topical,” he says. “There's a child separation at the border and a school bullying subplot.”

Eagle-eyed alumni will spot a Loyola Law reference before the novel begins. Baker dedicated the book to Geraghty and the Civitas ChildLaw Center. “I had very good teachers at Loyola, and she was among the best,” Baker says. “I'm glad we've stayed connected.”
—KS

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