ALUMNI AWARDS

Honorees Focus on the Help They Got and the Help They Can Give

When Kathy Nusslock was a college student, she worked as a server in a Milwaukee restaurant. That might not seem an important matter to bring up when you are receiving a major honor: the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Marquette Law School Alumni Association, in front of an audience of 300 people in Eckstein Hall. But to Nusslock, it still carried meaning.

"We had the servers, we had the bartenders, we had the hosts, we had the hostesses; everyone took a picture in front of a statue that was present in the restaurant," she said at the ceremony. "When I graduated from law school, I asked the owners of the restaurant for a copy of that photo, and I framed the photo, and I put it on my wall with my certificates. It's there today with my certificate that says I can practice in front of the United States Supreme Court."

Why?

"I did that to remind me where I came from, to remind me of what we all know is inside of us," Nusslock said. "As we go through our profession, these are the people who matter."

Nusslock articulated two themes that ran through the remarks of all four of the recipients at the Law School's alumni awards ceremony on April 23, 2026: an appreciation for their good fortune in building their careers from modest beginnings and the importance, upon success, of giving back to others.

Hon. M. Joseph Donald, L'88

Judge Joe Donald, chief judge of the Wisconsin Court of Appeals, received the Alumnus of the Year Award. In presenting the award to Donald, Dean Joseph D. Kearney said, "Joe is the sort of steady leader from whose service our justice system and the larger society benefit immensely. Even in a public profession such as the judiciary, often this service is behind the scenes."

As a trial court judge and appeals judge for more than 30 years, Donald has been continually looking for ways to make the system serve people better. One major accomplishment: He was closely involved in launching treatment courts in Milwaukee County, which have helped large numbers of people overcome the issues that got them into legal trouble.

In accepting the award, Donald recalled his family's roots in Milwaukee and the people who have helped him. He particularly praised Marquette University's Educational Opportunity Program, which boosted him greatly as an undergraduate.

"I stand here tonight because people chose to invest in me," Donald said. "They saw something in me that I didn't necessarily see in myself. That is what Marquette means by telling us all to 'Be The Difference.'"

He called on everyone to have the courage to face truths about the needs of many people in Milwaukee, to respond by doing what they can to help others, and "to recognize the dignity of every person, to listen, and to act in service of others."

Kathy Nusslock, L'85

Nusslock described herself as a person who gained opportunities because of her law degree and who has learned new things and stretched herself through everything she has become involved in. That includes cases involving product liability ("I learned how to make plastic spatulas, for Pete's sake") as well as leadership in the broader legal community. She has been a longtime litigator at the firm now known as Amundsen Davis, which she has also helped lead. In recent years, she has expanded her work in the law to include alternative dispute resolution.

Kearney particularly praised Nusslock's involvement in launching and growing the Eastern District of Wisconsin Bar Association. He quoted one of Nusslock's collaborators in that effort: "Kathy Nusslock shows up. She rolls up her sleeves. When she says she will do something, she does it well and on time. She understands the responsibility. She is able to articulate the mission. She connects and engages with people."

In presenting the award, Kearney told Nusslock, "During the course of your more than four decades in the law, as described by your nominators, you



Dean Joseph D. Kearney (left), Marquette University President Kimo Ah Yun (second from right), and Law Alumni Association Board President Ashley Smith (far right) flank the law alumni award winners at the conferral ceremony on April 23, 2026: (left to right) Joe Donald, L'88, Kathy Nusslock, L'85, Richard Esparza, L'21, and John G. Long, L'09.

have been a student and learner, mentor, counselor, advocate, collaborator, leader, and mediator. This work has been in firms, in associations, and in the broader community. The beneficiaries have been not just your clients and partners but also the profession and society more generally."

Richard Esparza, L'21

Richard Esparza began volunteering for pro bono work at the first opportunity he encountered as a new law student, Kearney said. A native of Milwaukee, Esparza understood the needs of the community. He has continued to be dedicated to pro bono work since becoming a lawyer, particularly as part of the Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinic at the United Community Center on Milwaukee's south side. Now an in-house counsel for Fiserv, he also serves on several nonprofit boards and mentors law students and young lawyers.

In presenting Esparza with the alumni association's Howard B. Eisenberg Service Award, Kearney quoted from Esparza's application for admission to the Law School, in which he wrote, "As a Spanish speaker, child of immigrants, and advocate for others, I believe I can be the change the immigrants of Milwaukee need. This change starts at Marquette Law." Kearney told Esparza, "To the extent it does—and we believe it does—it depends on alumni such as you. How inspiring for all of us that you elect to continue to serve our and your community in part through the opportunities that Marquette presents."

In accepting the award, Esparza said, "I don't like attention, so I'm outside my comfort zone right now." He said he hopes the award encourages others to volunteer. "Even a small amount of time helps make a big difference," he said.

John G. Long, L'09

In accepting the Charles W. Mentkowski Sports Law Alumnus of the Year Award, John G. Long maintained that in the early part of his time as a law student, no one would have bet on his becoming a successful lawyer. The first person in his family to become a lawyer, he came to Marquette Law School from Texas, and he has returned there to build a successful practice in sports law. He praised his professors at Marquette, particularly Matt Mitten and Paul Anderson, "for somehow molding me into an attorney." Long has continued to be involved in mentoring Marquette law students and supporting the sports law program.

Kearney explained, "He has formed himself into a trusted advocate on behalf of universities and coaches in the sports law sphere. More particularly: John has gone about the learning and the hard work necessary for representing clients in a wide range of matters concerning NCAA rules compliance and infractions; student-athlete name, image, and likeness (or NIL) issues; and Title IX gender equity—to name only a few of the burgeoning areas of sports law through which John makes his way on a daily basis."

All four of the award recipients have built their success with help from others and with a commitment to helping others as they enter the profession or make their way in their communities. Beyond expressing gratitude, their messages in receiving these recognitions can be summed up in two words from Nusslock: "Get involved." ■