

Karol Virginia Mason '79

Karol Mason is in her mid-30s. She is sitting at the top of the world she has chosen. Even in the 1990s her world is still primarily the province of Southern white men.

Her professional world is Alston & Bird, one of the most elite and powerful law firms in the city of Atlanta, the hub of the South. She has made partner there. She is the first African-American woman to achieve that status at a major firm in Atlanta. She runs in the New York marathon. And she's a Carolina woman.

Karol grew up in Amityville, New York and her mother felt that she would better understand her African-American heritage if she went to a Southern university. Carolina was the winner.

Karol remembers that in her student years Carolina was "a good place to grow up. I came away with a good education, and it was fun."

And it was a challenge. Her favorite professor was Dr. Lee Greene '67 of the English Department. "He was hard, but we really learned to our fullest potential. For African-American students he brought out the positive about our race and told us we deserved to be students at UNC."

Rosalind Fuse-Hall '80, now an associate dean in the College of Arts and Sciences, was friends with Karol during their student years. "Karol was tenacious in her support of other African-American students. She was a year ahead of me and was my role model. She inspired those of us in the African-American community at that time. She's the reason I went to law school and her image remains as strong to me now as it was then."

It's important to Karol that she embrace her opportunity to inspire others. "The combination of 'first' and 'African-American' and 'woman' is one that encourages others and serves as a role model for young people who may wonder about their own futures," she said. "I want to help young people so that I'm not the 'only' or 'first' anymore."

Karol is active in minority recruitment and retention at her law school (Michigan); she runs the summer program at Alston & Bird and has recruited minority lawyers; she came back to Chapel Hill earlier this spring to give the keynote speech at the academic awards ceremony for African- and Native-American UNC students with a 3.0 grade point average or better; and she has taught part time at Booker T. Washington High School in Atlanta because she wants to give something back to the community.

One of her law partners is Sadler Poe. He says "Karol doesn't know a stranger. Indeed, I've often thought there are few people anywhere whom she doesn't know. When we go anywhere with her we are sure to allow extra time because she will speak to everyone she meets.

"This attraction to people slated her for the role of facilitator. Put Karol in a room of contentious clients and attorneys, and before long, she will have found something in common with each of them. Her friendliness and ability to get along with others has often aided the causes of her clients."

Her senior year at Carolina, Karol received the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award, given to a special few with "unselfish interest in the welfare of their fellow men." The award's emphasis is on humanitarian contribution.

Karol tells young people to be proud. The University is proud of Karol Mason and the honor she reflects upon her fellow alumni.