

Susan Haughton Ehringhaus '66

Poet Robert Frost once gave an interviewer this bit of advice: "Always fall in love with what you're asked to accept. Take what is given, and make it over your way. My aim in life has always been to hold my own with whatever's going. Not against: with."

Things don't always work out the way we plan. But, as the poet explained, when all is said and done, they can still work out for the best. Just ask Susan Ehringhaus.

Susan began planning her professional career before finishing her undergraduate days at Carolina and entering law school. The research, the environment, the intellectual stimulation and variety of studying the law – all pointed toward a long career as a law professor. Despite being one of only five women in her law class – and the only one to graduate with her class in 1968, with honors – Susan never strayed from her chosen career path. After a year in private practice, she joined the U.S. Justice Department's antitrust division.

When her former professor and law school dean Dickson Phillips '43 called in 1970 and asked her to consider a visiting faculty post, Susan jumped. "Consider it? It was the opportunity to fulfill a life's dream," she now says. Three years later, Susan was seriously eyeing an academic opportunity at another university that would have helped build her scholarly credentials.

That's when life – and then-Chancellor Ferebee Taylor '42 – threw her a curve.

Taylor offered Susan a newly created position as assistant to the vice chancellor for administration, the first legal affairs job in South Building, but she hesitated. She turned to old friend and law school dean Phillips for advice. As she recalls, he gave one of his characteristic, enigmatic answers: It depends on what you want to do with your time. She decided she liked the stimulating environment of, as she says, having colleagues who are philosophers, historians, physicians, public health experts, biochemists and biostatisticians.

The job proved to be uniquely suited to Susan's gifts. It has been a path of satisfaction and fulfillment for her, and that's a feeling shared by the Carolina leaders who have watched her for the past 25 years as she has built, from the ground up, a University legal team that is the envy of her peers.

Andy Vanore '59, who has worked with Susan through the state attorney general's office since she took her administrative post, remembers a long-ago lunchtime conversation with Dick Phillips. "The smartest student I have ever had the privilege of teaching is Susan Ehringhaus," Phillips told Vanore. Then Vanore said, "But dean, you taught me." To which Phillips replied, "Andy, as I told you, Susan is the smartest student I ever had the privilege of teaching."

Navigating a new legal landscape of Title IX, technology transfer and trademark licensing, while adapting to the seismic shifts in what academic institutions demanded from their lawyers, Susan has kept Carolina in the vanguard while helping four chancellors steer the University's course toward the 21st century.

She has become an invaluable asset to the University in the sense of continuity and accumulated knowledge in three transitions between chancellorships.

Susan's legal skills, versatility and willingness to get the job done have been recognized with the C. Knox Massey Award. Now she and Stuart Bondurant '50 join a distinguished list of GAA Distinguished Service Medal recipients who are married to each other.

While her title may be "vice chancellor and general counsel" and she may refer to herself as a mechanic and a facilitator whose basic function is to protect or just get out of the way, Susan is much more than Carolina's top lawyer. She's an integral part of the University's administrative team, serving on a multitude of campus committees and helping to shape management, planning and policy development. Susan also has worked in a number of professional organizations and maintains her faculty position at the law school, teaching one three-hour seminar each year on the law of higher education.

In some respects she presides over a small law firm, one whose business is the legal issues surrounding a major research university, shifting deftly from the details of a construction contract to watching out for the University's interests in a licensing agreement.

One wonders whether Susan ever has any quiet time. She does – one of this University's hardest-working administrators knows the solitude of early mornings, late evenings and weekends in South Building.