Nola Tedesco Foulston, ’76, admittedly “has lived a pretty charmed life,” with the value of education emphasized from an early age by her mother, a professional dancer, and her father, an educator. It was such an emphasis in her home that her mother worked to complete an associate’s degree from Wichita State in her 70s. It’s because of this upbringing that she holds her education from Washburn Law in such high regard.

Her time at Washburn helped steer her down a path that led to a successful career in Sedgwick County, where as district attorney from 1989 to 2013, she prosecuted countless criminal trials, including some in the international spotlight: the Carr brothers of the “Wichita Massacre;” serial killer Dennis Rader; and Scott Roeder, who murdered Dr. George Tiller.

Though trials may have been the public face of her work, Foulston was passionate about developing a professional and ethical environment in the DA’s office. Her many reforms included a 24-hour “roll out” for staff attorneys to work at crime scenes with law enforcement, adding special comfort dogs on call to aid juvenile and elderly crime victims, and being the first district attorney in the country to engage the “Babies on Board” program for her staff that allowed parents to bring their newborns to work so they could be there for their children. District attorneys around the U.S. borrowed these ideas after their success in Foulston’s office.

Having earned national and international acclaim and many honors, Foulston was selected to receive the American Bar Association’s esteemed Norm Maleng Minister of Justice Award before retiring as District Attorney in 2013. From there, she joined the Hutton Law Firm in Wichita where she handles personal injury and medical malpractice cases. Outside work, she has a passion for animals — her horse, Magic, a cat, and three dogs comprise what her husband, Steve Foulston, ’74, refers to as “Nola’s Ark.”

Here, Foulston shares exactly what she thinks about her much-lauded career.
Before we talk about your career, how did Washburn Law help you get where you are today? “Oh my God, I loved Washburn Law. It was like this switch flipped that said, ‘Pay attention. This is your career.’

“Jim Concannon, Carl Monk, Ray Spring, J. Elwood Slover, Linda Elrod — all these people — helped me become a lawyer. And those people deserve the credit. The professors at my law school helped me down that path in the right direction. I am proud of the chance they gave me to prove my worth and to succeed in the practice of law all these many years.”

As DA, you had incredible community support. How did you gain that support? “I was very interested in taking care of my staff — not only leading by example, but making sure they were ethical and professional. Together we made many changes; sometimes I was referred to as “mom” or “boss” by staff and law enforcement officers. We were a very active and very public office.

“What happened was that the district attorney’s office became so much of a model that the community really trusted the work we did. And that’s what you want. To this day, people stop me in the grocery store, and they talk to me about my career.”

How did you handle the 24/7 job? “You know, I didn’t take a vacation for forever. I had a hard time not being in the office, because it was like being a firefighter. Something would happen every day, and you had to be ready for it.

“When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1990, there were concerns expressed about my health, but I never considered it a disability, only another challenge that many people face in their lives. Think of all these silly strikes against me: an Italian from an immigrant family, female, multiple sclerosis. But I think for some reason, it was natural for me to keep working hard at being capable and not disabled.”

What was it like prosecuting Dennis Rader, the BTK Killer? “I don’t call it the BTK case, because that’s what he wanted to be called. He’s a serial killer, and I’m not going to call him the name, the moniker, that he gave himself.

“I was in the office (as assistant DA) when he was doing some of his murders back in the ’70s, and believe me, I had no clue that I would be the district attorney that prosecuted him. Turnabout was fair play.”

What stands out in your memory about the Carr brothers’ case? “My birthday is Dec. 14. And it was the year 2000. I had a 50th birthday, and I got a call in the middle of the night that there had been a quadruple homicide. It felt like 20 degrees below zero outside. It was out there in the middle of a soccer field; the wind was blowing. It was the most horrible night.

“I didn’t wake up in the morning and read in the newspaper what happened the night before. I’d already been there.”

How were you able to separate work and life? “When I was a younger prosecutor, I was doing sex offense cases. In my dreams, there were nightmares about what these offenders were doing to our community. It made me more resolute to work hard and to assure that victims of sexual assault were protected.

“I was more energized by working on my cases than I was afraid of them. I’m not someone who is fearful at all. It was my nature to put aside what was going on around me and still have a normal life and be a good mom. Sometimes I look back and ask myself how I did it all, but it was my belief that I could be hard-charging as a prosecutor, and a wife and mother and friend at home.”

You became DA in 1989; your son was born in 1990. How did you juggle the two? “Like so many mothers, I was there for all the exciting moments, like the pumpkin patch visit, school concerts and plays, outings to the zoo, and sending treats with Andrew on special days. It is all a balance. Sometimes I don’t know how the heck I did that — but it worked. I just made myself available by working all hours of the night. My staff used to laugh because at two or three in the morning, they’d be getting emails from me about ‘Make sure you do this, make sure you do that.’”