

Spring 2025 Newsletter



A Note from the Dean

As we close another academic year at SIU Simmons Law School, I want to take a moment to reflect with pride and gratitude. This year, our students, faculty, and alumni have continued to distinguish themselves in the classroom, the courtroom, and the community. Thanks to the incredible generosity of our donors, we've been able to make improvements to our building and programs—clear reflections of our community's unwavering commitment to excellence and public service.

Looking ahead, we remain focused on our mission: providing an accessible, high-quality legal education that prepares practice-ready graduates to serve with integrity. With new faculty joining our ranks, expanded experiential opportunities, and the continued support of our loyal alumni, we are poised for even greater success. Thank you for being a vital part of the Simmons Law family — your engagement, generosity, and Saluki spirit help propel our law school forward. I would also like to welcome Dean Hannah Brenner-Johnson to SIU—our faculty and staff are excited to bring her vision to life and work together to shape the next chapter of innovation, inclusion, and academic excellence at Simmons Law School.

Angela Upchurch
Acting Dean



SIU Simmons Law School commencement ceremony held on May 9

By Pete Rosenbery

John Simmons, an Alton attorney, SIU Board of Trustees member and donor, delivered the keynote address during commencement ceremonies for Southern Illinois University Simmons Law School on Friday, May 9. The ceremony in Shryock Auditorium honored 71 graduates in the Class of 2025.

SIU Carbondale Chancellor Austin A. Lane conferred degrees, with J. Phil Gilbert, U.S. senior district judge and SIU Board of Trustees chair, also in attendance.

“I had the privilege of watching the Class of 2025 grow from nervous first-year students into confident, compassionate advocates for justice,” said Angela Upchurch, law school acting dean. “What stood out to me most about this class was their heart — their commitment to fairness, their support for each other and their passion for their communities, spanning from Lagos, Nigeria, to Honolulu, Hawaii, and Benton, Illinois, to Jackson, Missouri. They built support networks for each other, even joining together for a Thanksgiving feast at the law school every year. Everyone at Simmons Law School shared pride in this class and what they accomplished. We couldn’t wait to see what they would accomplish in the legal profession!”

The Class of 2025 selected Amber M. Alexander, a graduate of Marion High School who spent eight years working in child services, to be the class speaker.

The honors law student had worked as a teaching assistant, research assistant, Taylor Mattis Fellow, president of Parents Attending Law School (PALS), a registered student organization, and managing editor of the SIU Law Journal. Alexander also balanced the demands of her studies while also growing her family, welcoming a son and daughter while in law school.

Peter Alexander, a professor of law and former law school dean who retired after a total of 13 years at SIU, was the faculty speaker. Alexander served as dean from 2003 to 2009 and a professor of law from 2009 to 2012. He returned to SIU as a visiting professor in 2021 before becoming a professor in 2023.

The ceremony marked the 49th anniversary of the law school's first graduating class of 1976, three years after the law school was founded.



Gilbert honors father with \$250K gift to SIU Simmons Law School

by Jeff Wilson

Southern Illinois University's Simmons Law School announced a generous \$250,000 gift from Judge Phil Gilbert, a monumental contribution that will establish the Senator John G. Gilbert Impact Fund in honor of Judge Gilbert's father. This transformative donation promises to significantly enhance the educational experiences and opportunities available to SIU's law students.

In honor of this remarkable gift, SIU Simmons Law School unveiled the newly named Senator John G. Gilbert Administrative Suite on Thursday, April 17.

"This name is more than just a sign on a wall, it reflects our vision, our mission, and the values that guide us every day," said Angela Upchurch, acting dean of the SIU Simmons Law School. "SIU and the law school are thriving today because of pioneers like Senator Gilbert."

Gilbert's dedication to education and his legacy of public service are exemplified through this contribution. The Senator John G. Gilbert Impact Fund will directly support initiatives that enrich the student experience, provide scholarships, and facilitate groundbreaking research in the field of law.

"With distinction and honor, Judge Phil Gilbert has carried forward his father's commitment to justice and public service," said John Simmons, SIU Board of Trustees member and founder of the Simmons Hanly Conroy law firm. "Following in his father's footsteps, Judge Gilbert has built an exemplary

career. His thoughtful jurisprudence, unwavering integrity, and dedication to the rule of law have earned him the respect of the legal community and the citizens he serves.”

A father’s legacy

John G. Gilbert, a native of Carbondale, graduated from SIU in 1933 and later attended the University of Illinois School of Law before starting his private practice.

He served as Jackson County state’s attorney and was a state senator. He played a key role in the development of SIU Edwardsville and the SIU School of Medicine in Springfield, working alongside SIU President Delyte Morris. He was also integral to the establishment of the law school at SIU Carbondale.

“Seeing the impact this law school has had on Southern Illinois, my father would be very proud,” said Judge Gilbert. “My father was labeled as the ‘education senator,’ and that was not just because of what he did at SIU. He was a strong supporter of education at all levels.”

When Gilbert passed away in 1989, then-U.S. Sen. Paul Simon acknowledged Gilbert’s significant contributions to education, stating that “SIU wouldn’t be what it is today without John Gilbert’s efforts.”

Although SIU System President Dan Mahony never had the chance to meet Sen. John G. Gilbert, he recognizes the impact he made on his son, Phil, and the SIU community.

“Judge Gilbert really is Mr. SIU,” Dr. Mahony said. “He cares about this place, he is passionate about this place, he puts this place first. While I never met Sen. Gilbert, I feel like I have because I know a lot of what Phil does was impacted by his father.”

Continuing the mission

A lifelong resident of Carbondale, Judge Gilbert joined the SIU Board of Trustees in 2015 and was reappointed in 2021. He served on the Illinois State Board of Elections, acting as chair and vice chair. He also served on the Election Reform Commission and the National Council on Governmental

“Today we celebrate a legacy that spans generations and has left an indelible mark on Southern Illinois,” said Ed Hightower, vice chair of the SIU Board of Trustees. “We’re not just honoring one Gilbert, we’re celebrating two – two men who dedicated themselves to making a difference, two men whose commitment to SIU has helped shape its past, present, and future.”

Gilbert was a partner at Gilbert, Kimmel, Huffman & Prosser, Ltd. He was then appointed by the Illinois Supreme Court as a circuit judge in the First Judicial Circuit, serving as a state court judge until his federal appointment. He later became a United States district judge for the Southern District of Illinois and served as chief judge. During his federal tenure, he completed a six-year term on the Judicial Conference Committee on Criminal Law.

In March 2014, Gilbert assumed Senior Status but continues to contribute significantly as a senior judge. Gilbert received the Silver Gavel Award from the criminal defense bars of the Southern District of Illinois and the Eastern District of Missouri, the SIU School of Law Founders’ Medal, and Loyola School of Law’s Distinguished Jurist Award.

“Judge Gilbert, thanks to you and thanks to your family,” said Chancellor Austin Lane. “This is an incredible gift, and your legacy will live on.”



Riding the Circuit to Carbondale

On March 18, the Illinois Supreme Court heard oral arguments in two cases before a packed audience at the Southern Illinois University Carbondale Student Center.

More than 900 junior high and high school students, undergraduate students, SIU law students, members of the community, and special guests listened to

arguments by attorneys in cases arising out of Kendall County and Cook County. The SIU Simmons Law School hosted the event, which is part of the state's high court tradition of "riding the circuit" throughout Illinois. A Q&A with First Circuit Judge Christy W. Solverson, the presiding judge in Jackson County, followed oral arguments.

This event was sponsored by the Illinois Supreme Court, the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts, the Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission, SIU Carbondale, and SIU Simmons Law School.



Federal judge, former SIU law professor presented Simonds lecture

by Pete Rosenbery

A former faculty member at Southern Illinois University Simmons Law School reflected on his career and time at SIU Carbondale, and his current role as a federal judge in Washington, D.C., during a lecture on April 22.

Ryan T. Holte, a judge on the U.S. Court of Federal Claims, presented "Living Lincoln's Vision From the Bench Twelve Years After SIU".

Holte was nominated to his current position in 2017 by President Donald Trump and sworn in July 2019 after confirmation by the U.S. Senate. Before that, he had a career in academia, including serving as assistant professor of law at SIU from 2013 to 2017 where he taught intellectual property law and property law. He also currently serves as jurist in residence professor of law at the University of Akron School of Law.

During his presentation, Holte discussed his time at SIU Carbondale and how his court and jurisdiction roots date back to President Lincoln and his practical approach to government was learned from his time in Illinois law practice.

Zvi Rosen, an assistant professor of law, has known Holte for years and said he's "a model speaker in the spirit of the Gene & Katy Simonds Lectureship in Democracy."

"Judge Holte has had a fascinating career as a federal judge, law professor, engineer and entrepreneur," Rosen said. "He began his academic career teaching here, and I believe he has a wealth of experience and a unique perspective to impart about Southern Illinois, Abraham Lincoln and what it means to be a judge."



Simmons Law School Recognition Banquet

We held our Recognition Ceremony on Thursday, April 24th, to celebrate our students' accomplishments during the school year! Congratulations to everyone who was recognized during the ceremony!

We would like to especially highlight our five Outstanding Award recipients: Professor Bill Drennan, Outstanding Scholar; Professor Peter Alexander, Outstanding Teacher; Dillon Ruzich, Outstanding Research Assistant; Kyle Printer, Outstanding Teaching Assistant; and Paul Davis, Outstanding Teaching Support.



SIU Day at the Capitol

We were proud to attend SIU Day at the Illinois State Capitol on March 20th! We were represented by (pictured left to right) Dale Aschemann, Clinical Assistant Professor of Law, Stevie Wright (2L), Joshua Moore (2L), and Angela Upchurch, Acting Dean and Professor of Law.

Professor Aschemann and Dean Upchurch also spoke with alum State Senator Jil Tracy '80 (pictured above on the right) about the significance of higher education.

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