

Debra Zumwalt, JD '79; The Chief Legal Officer at the Farm

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Debra Zumwalt, JD '79, is vice president and general counsel of Stanford University. (Photo by Timothy Archibald)

When Debra Zumwalt (<https://oqc.stanford.edu/debra-zumwalt>), JD '79, takes a vacation, she really likes to get away. She has traveled to more than 60 countries and been on three African safaris. Most recently, she and her daughter Elizabeth Zumwalt Harmon (BA '12) went scuba diving in the Bahamas—with sharks. “The tiger sharks were big and muscular,” says Zumwalt. “Some were 15 feet long.” Those inclined toward lawyer jokes might call this a “busman’s holiday.” But for Zumwalt, vice president and general counsel of Stanford University, it was perfect. “It was relaxing and otherworldly,” she says. “Everything moves more slowly underwater.” And best of all: “I couldn’t check my email or use my BlackBerry.” This provided quite a contrast to Zumwalt’s day job—which is also her night job—when she is on call 24/7 and moving at a furious pace. As Stanford’s chief legal officer, she oversees a staff of 16 lawyers who provide legal services to every part of the institution. The heart of the legal work relates to the university’s academic undertakings. This involves Zumwalt in issues surrounding knowledge creation, teaching, students, and faculty—not to mention the marching band. But that’s not all. Stanford is like a small city with a weekday population of around 30,000 people, she explains, with its own police and fire departments, both of which report to her.

“We also operate a power plant, a dam, and we own more than 8,000 acres in Silicon Valley, including very valuable commercial and academic real estate. Stanford Management Company (<http://www.smc.stanford.edu/>) is like an investment bank, managing more than \$20 billion in assets,” says Zumwalt. “We also provide the legal work for our two hospitals, which are large and important entities themselves; they treat tens of thousands of patients a year, have over \$3 billion a year in operating revenues, and are in the midst of a \$5 billion project to replace and expand their buildings, as anyone who has tried to drive in that part of campus recently will know.”

Zumwalt relishes her position, in part because of the diversity of the population and issues she encounters. “On any given day, I might interact with any number of the university’s constituents—trustees, senior officers, deans, students, faculty, staff—not to mention outside counsel, government regulators, and local community members,” she says. “It’s never boring.”

Beyond the variety, Zumwalt enjoys “getting things done” and she particularly likes being proactive in helping the university avoid problems. Having spent 15 years in private practice as a litigation associate and partner at Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman (<http://www.pillsburylaw.com/>), where she served on the firm’s seven-member executive board and managed its Silicon Valley office, Zumwalt says she was frequently faced with crisis management. “I liked litigation, but it was reactive. I often found myself saying, ‘If only the client had done x ...’”

At Stanford, Zumwalt has emphasized prophylactic training to minimize those sorts of situations. “We do a lot of preventive work and have put practices and policies in place to educate faculty and staff throughout the institution,” she says.

Still, conflict is sometimes unavoidable, and Zumwalt's office manages all litigation—including patent, class actions, employment disputes, injury and liability cases, and medical malpractice. She also gets involved in "town-gown" relations, including the negotiation of entitlements with neighboring cities and Santa Clara County to allow the growth necessary to support the university's academic mission.

When not working on university matters, Zumwalt finds time to serve on a number of boards, which vary widely from Exponent, Inc., a NASDAQ-traded engineering and scientific consulting company (with Stanford origins), to the co-ed American University of Afghanistan (<http://auaf.edu.af/>) (AUAF), which she was instrumental in helping to launch in 2005. Zumwalt drafted the bylaws and designed and led the training for AUAF's inaugural board. She also noticed that there were no women board members. "I did not hesitate to point that out," she says. As a result, she was appointed to the board and since 2006 has served as first vice chair, treasurer, and chair of the finance and audit, nominations, and academic committees.

Zumwalt describes AUAF as "a startup in a war zone" and notes that 2014 has been a particularly challenging year: "The combination of U.S. troop withdrawal and the presidential election has led to destabilization and increased violence." Nonetheless, she is as committed as ever to the university. "I am passionate about education, especially for women," she says. "It's the only way to change the world."

She especially enjoys going to Afghanistan every year to attend graduation. "I love talking to students, hearing how they struggled to get to the university and how it is changing their lives and their families' lives. It's incredibly uplifting," she says.

Zumwalt has garnered widespread recognition and numerous awards, in acknowledgment of her many accomplishments and contributions. Among the most meaningful, she received InsideCounsel's 2012 Transformative Leadership Award (<http://www.transformativeleadershipawards.com/ehome/transformativeleadershipawards/home%20/?&>), which established the eponymous Debra L. Zumwalt Pioneer Award in her honor.

Topping it all off are the perks of her position. "My office has a view of Memorial Church, the Quad, and the Dish. And I get to stand—though not sit—in the Skybox for football games. But the best," she says gleefully, "is a parking space on the Oval."

Given all that, it's no wonder Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy said to Zumwalt at a recent Stanford commencement ceremony, "Gee, you have a really great job." **SL**

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