



GIVING WITH INTENTION: Carolyn Popp's Legacy of Opportunity

A trailblazing tech entrepreneur finds new purpose by helping students follow their dreams

Carolyn Popp knows what it means to create something from the ground up. In 1969, she joined IBM as one of 28 software engineers — and she was the only woman. That spirit of determination carried her into cofounding her own software company, which she ran with her husband until its sale. After that milestone, she began asking a different kind of question: “How do I want to use the resources I’ve built?”

Years later, after stepping back from her company, Carolyn was looking for a way to make an impact. Her daughter, Professor Catherine Hardee — who teaches at California Western School of Law — often spoke about her students, particularly those pursuing public interest law. That struck a chord.

With Catherine’s encouragement, Carolyn established the Popp Summer Internship Assistance Fund, supporting CWSL students who accept unpaid legal internships in public interest and social justice roles. The scholarship helps cover basic living expenses while students gain experience working for judges, nonprofits, and advocacy organizations.

“Maybe they just need a chance,” she said. “They need a little bit — that little bit of help somewhere.”

Carolyn has had the opportunity to meet several of the students who’ve received her support, each pursuing a different path but united by a shared purpose. “It was just exciting,” she said. “I really appreciate ... hearing how they enjoyed their summer and were able to follow their dreams and do what they wanted to do. And if I was a small part of it, I was happy to help.”

Though she’s not a lawyer herself, Carolyn feels proud to support the mission of California Western. “I just like to be part of it,” she said. “I do, and I feel like, I give to a lot of organizations, but this one is really special to me because I’m helping young people pursue their dreams.”

She’s especially moved by students who bring resilience and heart to their goals. “Maybe they didn’t have all the advantages,” she said. “But they’re showing up. They’re working hard. And they care.”

And what would she say to someone thinking about giving? “More people should be doing it,” she said. For Carolyn, giving is not just about the moment, it’s about the ripple effect. Her generosity opens doors for students who might otherwise have to turn down meaningful work. And through their stories, she sees the lasting difference one opportunity can make.