

By Jeff Mortimer

“You should be able to find a way to teach in everything you do every day,” says Vivian Fell Sangunett.

She sets a pretty good example, whether it’s cuddling with her seven-year-old grandson as they conjure “magic carpet rides” to the moon and Egypt, or in the various roles she’s played at H & R Block, as a tax preparer, office director, instructor of taxes and employee trainer. Sangunett also oversaw a tax seminar hosted by the Northern Virginia Chapter of the Virginia Society of Enrolled Agents.

“I used to run the Tri-State Seminar, a big tax conference in northern Virginia,” Sangunett says. “I put the book together and then was the speaker. I helped train this young woman who worked under me to become an enrolled agent [a person qualified to practice before the Internal Revenue Service], and she took over running this seminar. Now I’m helping her as opposed to her helping me, which is kind of fun. It just gives me such great pride to see how well these folks are doing.”

These folks who profit from her passion for teaching also include her clients (“You don’t have to know how to do it but you’re going to understand what’s on your tax return”), the students in her licensing classes, the employees she’s trained, participants in her tax seminars and, for the two years that she chaired it, the Fairfax County (VA) Schools’ gifted and talented program.

“I can teach because others could teach,” says Sangunett, who earned a bachelor’s degree from U-M, a master’s in education from Rackham and another in human resources management from Marymount University.

One memory is especially vivid. “One of my political science professors came into school one day in a blinding snowstorm, arriving on cross-country skis,” she recalls. “I was incredibly impressed because not only was he an extremely interesting lecturer but he really cared about his students. That professor had a tremendous impact on me.”

Her Michigan experience also showed her the value of continuing to learn as well as teach. “I’m only required to get 30 hours a year of continuing education, but I get a hundred,” she says. “If you don’t learn, you can’t help your clients.”

What is it about tax preparation that a

person of Sangunett’s talents finds attractive?

“Let’s think about it,” she says. “In medicine, science, sometimes art, a lot of things are intuitive but you have to have facts to make a diagnosis. It’s like solving a puzzle. So are taxes. They’re based in fact, you have to know the law, and the best thing I can do for my clients is to put every nickel I can in their pocket and keep it out of Uncle Sam’s and do it legally.”

Sangunett, who serves on the Rackham Dean’s Advisory Board, responded to the President’s Challenge for graduate education by endowing the Vivian Fell Sangunett Graduate Student Support Fund, which is available to students in any Rackham program. Even students who have other awards often need additional financial help for research or travel, and the Sangunett Fund will help provide that.

“My goal is to make sure that the professors who educate my grandchildren and great-grandchildren are as exciting as my political science professor was when I was a freshman,” she says. “The bottom line is that providing high-quality training for future teachers is pretty high on my priority list, because the most important person is the teacher. I want to make sure those people are the best, and that’s what Michigan is all about, the leaders and the best.” ■

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