



# Washingtonians of the Year

For 38 years, *The Washingtonian* has honored men and women who give their time and talent to make this a better place for all of us. Here are 2009's winners.

By Leslie Milk ■ Photographs by Matthew Worden

# 2009

## Cornelius Kerwin » Doing the university proud

American University was still reeling from the ouster of president Benjamin Ladner when Neil Kerwin took over as acting president in 2005. But Kerwin was a believer—he had deep roots in AU. He'd arrived in 1967 as a scholarship freshman and, aside from detours for his master's and PhD, he never left.

By September 2007, when Kerwin became AU's 14th president and the first alum to lead it, he was prepared. He had moved up the ranks from his first faculty appointment in 1975 to dean of the School of Public Affairs and then provost. But he still needed to gain the confidence of a faculty, student body, board, and donors whose faith in the institution had been shaken. "The test of how you manage a crisis is how you emerge from

it," Kerwin says. "We came through admirably."

The university is about to complete a \$200-million capital campaign. A second building for the Kogod School of Business was recently completed, and the Kogod campaign includes scholarship money so "kids like me can come to AU," Kerwin says.

He grew up in a family where neither parent had finished high school. But his father dared to run for public office and won the primary against a sitting state senator. The lesson for young Neil Kerwin: Never say no to an opportunity.

Kerwin has plans to expand AU's programs into public health, Latino studies, and sustainability. He's also committed to strengthening AU's ties to DC. More than 600 freshmen come to campus a



week early to do community service. The School of Education is involved in every ward in DC. The business school offers free tax advice to residents, and the law school op-

erates free clinics.

Kerwin is inspired by the students he meets on campus: "They are not only academically strong—they want to change the world."