Alumna is Champion for Education Reform and Women’s Rights
by Kristin Kemp

As a school teacher, state senator, college professor, biographer and journalist, Pat Pascoe (English, PhD ’82) could be considered a modern day Renaissance woman. Perhaps she was inspired by her doctoral research: she studied Renaissance literature during graduate school in DU’s English department.

Each phase of her career is linked. Pascoe’s first book – a 2011 biography about Colorado’s first female senator Helen Ring Robinson – was formulated when Pascoe served as a Colorado State Senator and presented the resolution commemorating the 100th anniversary of women in Colorado receiving the vote in 1893.

“As I learned more about Robinson, I realized how much we had in common. We were both Democrats, both represented Capitol Hill, both members and presidents of the Denver Woman’s Press Club and both married to lawyers,” said Pascoe, who served in the Senate from 1989 to 2003. “I felt as if I were her doppelganger, which led me to write her biography.”

Pascoe, whose legacy in the Senate is best known for her early childhood education reform, is now writing a book about the Keyes case to desegregate Denver Public Schools, which was filed in 1969 and settled by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973.

“Because the story of DPS’s desegregation has been forgotten or dimly remembered, I am now writing a book,” said Pascoe. “The citizen movement and the good people behind the effort to integrate the schools in the late 60’s had great faith that different races could live together peacefully.”

Her forthcoming book will examine the Denver School Board’s decisions in the 1960s that deliberately segregated minority students and teachers. She will depict how their racism led to the Supreme Court decision that required Denver to desegregate its schools “root and branch.”

The book reflects her lifetime interest in education, because she began her career as a high school English teacher. When her children were young, Pascoe learned the importance of early childhood education. It’s no surprise education was a top priority for her during her 12 years in state government.

In the Senate, Pascoe was particularly involved with the expansion of the number of children in the Colorado Preschool Project (CPP), an early childhood education program administered by the Department of Education that funds the opportunity for eligible children to attend preschool or kindergarten.

“Preschool is the best use of public dollars to make a major difference in the later success of the students,” said Pascoe, who served as chair of the Senate Democratic Caucus and chair of the Senate Education Committee. She also sponsored the temporary marital
maintenance bill, the spousal protection bill, gun control bills, the truancy bill and freedom of press for high school students.

Even before being elected into office, Pascoe and her husband Monte were change agents in Denver. Not only did Monte chair the Colorado Democratic Party, but he also ran for Denver Mayor and the Denver School Board.

While juggling local activism activities, raising a family and teaching school, Pascoe yearned for more – a doctorate. She was accepted to DU’s English doctoral program where she studied Renaissance literature under Professor Gunnar Boklund.

“With my PhD in hand I had hoped to teach Renaissance courses at the college level, but such jobs were in short supply when I finished in 1982,” she reflected. “Instead I began writing for a news service at the Capitol and that led to my years in office.”

“Pat is a local hero. Her work as a reformer has been an inspiration to me personally and professionally in my work as an education administrator,” said Danny McIntosh, dean of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. “So I’m left to ponder: just as Pat wrote Robinson’s important biography, when will Pat’s biography be published? It would be a good read.”