Dual motives propelled Karen Ballard Molzen toward the law.

As a cancer researcher with a bachelor of science degree in cellular biology, she discovered to her dismay that research money was mostly being funneled to institutions in big cities — emphatically not where the Albuquerque native wanted to be.

Then there was the haunting memory of a childhood friend pursuing his dreams as an architecture student.

"When my childhood best friend, John Shrock, was murdered in 1980 in France, it started me thinking about the importance of the rule of law," she said. "In its absence, anarchy reigns and true freedom ends."

Molzen abandoned scientific research after seven years in the field to enroll in the University of New Mexico School of Law in 1982. She graduated third in her class three years later, serving on the law review, winning jurisprudence awards in business association, criminal procedure and legal writing, earning the Medical-Legal Tort Scholar award and serving on the first law school team that briefed a case for the U.S. Supreme Court, one that turned out to be a landmark in mental disability law.

Molzen, 58, a federal magistrate judge in Las Cruces for the last dozen years, was named chief U.S. Magistrate judge for the district of New Mexico on April 1 and started her new job full time in Albuquerque on Monday.

Molzen takes the place of previous Chief Magistrate Richard M. Puglisi, who moved to Hawaii to become a federal magistrate judge there. The chief magistrate position involves coordinating the work of the district's 13 federal magistrate judges (two are part time) scattered throughout the state, as well as handling her own caseload, much of it inherited from Puglisi.

And there are the administrative chores.

"I'm already on a lot of committees that I didn't know existed," she said.

Her salary doesn't change, and she doesn't get new furniture, which she says is only fitting in tough economic times.

Molzen brings a unique skill set to the job.

She worked for private law firms before becoming the permanent law clerk for U.S. District Judge John E. Conway for eight years.

She has wide experience in introducing electronics to the courtroom and has given presentations about it to various committees of the Judicial Conference of the United States.

And she is perhaps the only federal magistrate in the country who knows how to operate, or even spell, a spectrophotometer, an instrument employed in her research in the late 1970s that uses light to detect drugs.

In one criminal case, involving a defendant accused of violating his conditions of release by using cocaine, she recalls, "I was familiar with the process when the expert came to testify how you use one of those machines."
The most interesting part of her job in southern New Mexico "is how things have changed down here," she said. "The caseload is just astonishing with all the illegal alien cases and all the drug cases."

As a federal magistrate judge — appointed by the district judges for a seven-year term — she has had the rare opportunity of presiding over the wedding of her widowed mother, Pat, to the retired Navy captain she calls her second dad, Maury Hartle, who live in Albuquerque. Molzen said she's looking forward to spending more time with her parents and her daughter, Jessica, development director for New Mexico AIDS Services.

Molzen said the strengths she brings to the job include being "down to earth, and that helps me to address real problems where people need resolution to move on with their lives."

Oh, and she can laugh at herself.

Of her new title, she notes that Chief Judge Bruce Black goes by "The Chief."

"I'm going to go by 'Ms. Chief' — as in 'mischief.' I think it is important to have a sense of humor."

"I'm going to be a fountain," she says. "Not a drain."