

## Ron Ward Interview Transcript

**Kelly Oshiro** Welcome, listeners, to *Voices That Move Us*. This podcast is hosted by the 2025 Fellows of the Washington Leadership Institute, or WLI. WLI is a leadership development program in Washington State that seeks to recruit, train, and develop traditionally underrepresented attorneys for future leadership positions. We are celebrating 20 years of the Washington Leadership Institute, a visionary collaboration between the Washington State Bar Association and the three law schools in Washington. Each episode features compelling stories from WLI alumni—diverse attorneys who have gone on to lead in powerful, sometimes unexpected ways across law, policy, business, and the community. These are the stories that build legacy, fuel change, and inspire a more inclusive future. Today, we are joined by **Ron Ward**, who is a managing partner at the Law Office of Ronald R. Ward, PLLC. His practice area focuses on wrongful deaths and serious auto, rain, construction site, and medical negligence personal injuries. Ron is the founder of the Washington Leadership Institute. He served as the president of the Washington State Bar Association and was the first person of color to serve as the WSBA president in the organization's history. Ron has received countless awards and recognition for his professional work as a trial lawyer and as the founder of WLI. WLI was founded in 2005 and celebrates its 20th year, boasting over 200 alumni. Ron is a passionate advocate for equal access to justice and uplifting attorneys in the legal community. We, the Class of 2025, and the classes before us are indebted to Ron for his vision in creating the Washington Leadership Institute, and are so honored to have him as our guest today. So today, our main topics will include Ron's personal journey, his experience of the legal profession and as a leader, his legacy, and his hopes for the future of the profession. **Welcome, Ron.**

**Ron Ward** Good morning.

**Kelly Oshiro** Okay. So can you share a moment from your early life or upbringing that led you to the legal profession?

**Ron Ward** Wow, what an introduction. Maybe we should just conclude this now. Thank you so much. Back in 1954, my grandmother took me on a train trip across the country on the then brand-new California Sunset Limited, which featured Pullman cars. And we headed across the country to Texas to see her mother. We arrived for a change of trains in El Paso, Texas, at the El Paso train station one late evening. The seating there was segregated. And there was a racist incident, which upset my grandmother and also upset the Pullman car porters who had helped us off the train with certain bags in preparation for the change. My grandmother tried as best as she could to explain to a child what had occurred. I never forgot that incident, ever. It made an enormous impression on me. So that had something to do with my focus on the legal aspects of our lives. I also developed very early on—because she was a big advocate of knowledge. She used to tell me always that knowledge was treasure. So I started reading about people like Thurgood Marshall at an extremely early age, and also following the life and the myths surrounding Abraham Lincoln, which also had an influence on me. So those are some of the things that led me down a path into the legal profession.

**Kelly Oshiro** So, Ron, you and I have something in common: you're a former Assistant Attorney General, and I myself am a current Assistant Attorney General. Can you talk about what type of legal work you were doing there at the Attorney General's Office? What did you do afterwards?

**Ron Ward** Well, I initially started at the Attorney General's Office as an Assistant Attorney General. And I did litigation work in the Department of Labor and Industries Division. I handled workers comp cases—defense of workers comp cases. I subsequently became deputy head of that division, and I remained in that position until I went into private practice in, uh, 1983.

**Kelly Oshiro** So one of the things that strikes me about you, Ron, is that—we are going to get to talk to a lot of legal leaders on this podcast—you are the only guest right now who is the only one who struck out on their own and started their own law firm, as we sit here today. Can you explain how you came to the decision of wanting to form your own legal practice?

**Ron Ward** Well, my career out of the Attorney General's Office started with the really well-regarded plaintiff's personal injury firm, Lovenson, Friedman, Bugin, Dugan, and Bland. I remained with them for 23 years, becoming a senior partner there. When I became president of the State Bar Association, I realized that if I ever wanted to participate in my own practice, it was then or never. And I struck out immediately after my presidential term ended and opened my own office with one of my friends, who was also a former partner at Lovenson Friedman. I wanted the autonomy. I wanted the ability to select my own cases. And I wanted the fulfillment that you derive in that kind of situation—between you and your clients—as the lawyer in the firm. And I have never regretted that decision. I still enjoy it a lot. Some aspects of the practice I don't enjoy as much, but when I step in front of the jury for the first time—even now—I can still hear that music roaring in my head.

**Kelly Oshiro** And what music is that?

**Ron Ward** Anything from Tchaikovsky and Eric Satie to Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, and Pink Floyd.

**Kelly Oshiro** That is an eclectic mix, and I would agree that it would be excellent trial music. Speaking of your term as president at the Bar Association, as we were preparing for this interview, I came across an article that you had written in the Bar Bulletin about 20 years ago when you were president. There are so many articles in the Bar Bulletin, but I read that article so many times because there were just so many quotes from you that really resonated with me. In that article, you kind of came out to the State Bar Association with your intent in being a president for the bar, and your theme was *lawyers render service*. When I think of your name, I think about you servicing the community first and foremost. So, can you just explain what service as a lawyer means to you?

**Ron Ward** Well, I should clarify for posterity that, um, that theme—*lawyers render service*—I actually derived from Fred Gray, who was a civil rights pioneer in the South and one of Martin Luther King's attorneys. I had the pleasure on a number of occasions of meeting with him. He actually came up here as a guest and speaker at a Loren Miller Bar Association annual dinner years ago. So I just want to clarify that for the record. What it means to me: we have a special

status in society. We also have a special gift. We have a high echelon of influence and power in this society. Service, to me, means that we have an obligation to use that status—to use that gifting—not just for the profession, not just for the enhancement of our own careers in the profession, but also to be integral facets of problem-solving of the myriad problems that face communities in this society, and particularly underrepresented communities. We have a special Renaissance spectrum of talents which put us in a unique position to do that and to make impact. And that's service for me—doing all of those things, but especially doing that. And it's been one of the underlying themes that we insisted on in the Leadership Institute from the very outset—not just to serve the legal community. This wasn't just about positions, that sort of thing. It was to get back into the communities and effect changes there, where you have a spectrum of problems that transcend the communities themselves—race, ethnicity—they're common. And they need to be addressed so that we get to the point where we achieve as much as we can of a whole society for everyone here.

**Kelly Oshiro** On the topic of the Washington Leadership Institute—you are the founder of the Institute—so everyone really wants to hear about what inspired you to create the program. What was your vision?

**Ron Ward** Well, this is a long answer—I hope it's okay. Yes. There were no leadership programs existing in Washington—and largely, for that matter, not in the country. A colleague in the ABA House of Delegates and friend of James Williams and myself, a guy by the name of Harry Johnson, had started, like, a two-day Leadership Academy in Maryland. And that's when the idea first occurred. But I understood—and it bothered me even before I met Harry—it bothered me that there were no leadership programs existing in Washington. There specifically were no programs that focused specifically on young lawyers of color, women, LGBT lawyers, and lawyers with disabilities. I thought that was appalling—that there were none. And I was determined during my term to bring one into being, because the need was apparent. I also wanted to participate in an effort to accelerate the leadership maturation of lawyers with lesser experience in their careers so that they reach fruition in terms of their ability a lot earlier. And I wanted to do it with people who knew a bit about leadership through their own experiences. Finally, I wanted to create a pipeline from traditionally underrepresented lawyers into the higher echelons of leadership and policy in WSBA, for the reasons that I've talked to you about. Lawyers have outside influence and power in this society. We've all heard the kind of hackneyed lawyer jokes. But when we have issues of grave magnitude, we usually end up turning to lawyers to participate in the solution to those problems. The second reason why—the second major reason—why I wanted to see a leadership institute was that we—and I'm talking about diverse lawyers from underrepresented communities, including women—were virtually invisible. And that had been true since the founding of the WSBA in 1888. It took until 1975 for the first woman lawyer to become a member of the BOG, of the Board of Governors—that was Betty Fletcher. It was 1988 before we had the first woman WSBA president, Elizabeth Bracelin. That was 100 years after the WSBA was formed. It was 1989 before we had the first Black member of the Board of Governors—that was Lembhard Howell who is one of two of the most famous civil rights lawyers in Washington legal history. The other is Carl Maxey from Spokane. I became the first Black WSBA president in 2004. That was 104 years after the formation of the WSBA. As of 2005—and now, what are we, about 136 years?—of existence, or thereabouts, we've only had five women presidents: Elizabeth Bracelin, Mary Fairhurst, Ellen Dial, Michelle Radosevich,

and currently Sunitha Anjilvel. I thought that it was time to do something about this “history,” quote-unquote. And I met some great people who were enthusiastic about it, generated a lot of support, and the rest, as they say, is history.

**Kelly Oshiro** As the program was being developed, did you encounter any challenges in getting support for your vision of the Institute?

**Ron Ward** Well, um, yes and no. I’m sure there were people who felt that this was the last thing that they wanted to come into being. We’re talking about a potential power nexus here, and the creation of an environment in which it can evolve—for a group of people, even within WSBA, who had not had a safe place and an opportunity to do that. On the other hand, I got virtually unanimous support from my board. I made the best decision—maybe—that I made over the history of the existence of the program: I convinced James Williams to allow me to appoint him as the first president of WSBA. And we together subsequently convinced Mary Yu, about six years in, to join us. So that’s the way that I would answer that question—there was a mixed reaction, but it was primarily positive.

**Kelly Oshiro** Leadership is not something that they teach us in law school. So, as current fellows in the program, besides developing the program, can you explain how you, James, and Justice Yu went about kind of envisioning the early curriculum of the program?

**Ron Ward** The early curriculum—well, James and I had a couple of discussions. But he largely formulated the entire curriculum. I had some suggestions with regard to certain subjects I felt needed to be included—things that don’t ordinarily occur when you think about lawyers. I thought that lawyers should understand the economics of their practice by way of being able to read a balance sheet. It can be absolutely crucial to the survival of the practice. But James crafted this. He put a lot of time into it, and he did a wonderful job in terms of setting up the initial structure. And we, every year, get together as a board at a retreat and we tear that structure down. We tinker with it. We keep some things, we jettison other things, and then we get the curriculum for the new year. But it’s largely remained the original curriculum, and I think his work on that has proven its worth in terms of what the product has been.

**Kelly Oshiro** Because this is a legacy podcast, how has WLI evolved since its inception in 2005, and what’s stayed the same?

**Ron Ward** I can answer this question in a number of ways. I think that, first of all, it’s transcended—definitely—the initial vision that I had and certainly that James had, and we’ve talked about that. I mean, we wanted to develop an environment for us to grow and to thrive in terms of this thing we call leadership. By transcended, I mean: we now have three of the U.S. District Court judges and a magistrate judge on the Western District of Washington federal court who are graduates of WLI. The current State Attorney General is a graduate of WLI. The first woman of color in Clark County to become a Superior Court judge, Camara Banfield, is a WLI graduate. The first woman of color to become a Superior Court judge in Thurston County is a WLI graduate. The first Latino male to become a Superior Court judge in Clark County and then a member of the Division II Court of Appeals is a WLI graduate. And we could go on and on and on. It’s been life-changing in terms of our access to the echelons of policy and power in the legal

profession in this state. I think that the program has evolved in that it's just gotten better. It's been fine-tuned and fine-tuned. The quality of the people who have chosen to grace us with their presence in the program has remained constant and consistent. I'm sitting across from two of them this morning. I'm not gilding your lily here—in my initial remarks every year, I talk about the fact that we consider you special. You have a special gifting. And our job is to try to bring that to fruition such that you use it in order to impact, in a positive manner, the people around you throughout your career. And you can have a huge positive impact because of that special intangible aspect of you. So that's the way I answer that question.

**Kelly Oshiro** So a big part of WLI is that service aspect of it. So I have a couple of questions for you from our partners. So diverse persons often have the shared experience of having impostor syndrome, asking themselves, you know, “Am I in this room because, you know, I'm a Latina female? Or am I only here because I'm a transgender woman? Or would I be here if I was not, you know, an Asian female?” So with all of that doubt that one might have, what advice would you have for those who are having those types of thoughts? You know, if I deserve to be in this room just because of what I look like?

**Ron Ward** I've talked about the fact that part of our job is to bring you to a place—if you haven't arrived there already—where you realize that's a totally fallacious notion: that you are a quote impostor unquote. That we see your specialness. That we see the potential for that. We see the potential for benefit to those around you, including us. And we try to foster that and affirm it throughout this curriculum. I have this old saying, especially with regard to our focus, which is to establish a collective effort to vanquish discrimination, inequity, and injustice. That's a foundational precept. And colloquially: there are them that do, and them that don't. You are part of the cadre of those that do. You could hardly be an impostor and function in that manner, and function effectively, and have the impact that we've proven this program has. Look at the graduates. Look at the people who have preceded your current class—or have succeeded your - preceded your current class.

**Kelly Oshiro** I am just honored to follow—or be among—such great alumni in the program. WLI really has fostered that sense of community, because sometimes the practice of law can be isolating, where nowadays we're in front of a computer screen working on motions, working on discovery, preparing for trial. And so it's isolating. So how did you find your community—whether in legal practice or outside of the legal community?

**Ron Ward** I looked for entities that I identified as sharing my passion about the issues that drive my life. And they're mostly about equity, diversity, civil rights, victims' rights, and the rights of underrepresented people. And I gravitated towards, of course, my own communities, legal association, or another bar association. But I also—it was easy for me to go from there and become involved with entities like the State Trial Lawyers Association, the American Board of Trial Advocates (which I had the honor of being a president of), and—interestingly enough—the ABA House of Delegates, which launched one of the greatest diversity initiatives back in the period of the early 2000s, particularly when Dennis Archer was president and Robert Grey was president, in the country. That's where I found my community. I've also found community within the community. I'm president of a nonprofit, which my wife is the executive director of—for about 10 years now—called the Agape House. The Agape House deals exclusively with

providing housing for young women who have aged out of foster care and may be homeless or in danger of becoming homeless. So we provide access to housing. And once the young woman is quasi-stable—not worried about where they’re going to sleep tonight or next week or next month—then we attempt to open connections to community partners like Bellevue Community College or different employers to provide employment training, apprenticeships, access to academia at various institutions, that type of thing. So that’s how I have sort of found my community—under the excellent and able stewardship of my wife.

**Kelly Oshiro** What advice would you give to law students or young attorneys looking to make connections? And how would you advise them getting involved in other organizations?

**Ron Ward** I’ve been a lifelong victim of imposter syndrome. You need to overcome that to the extent that you get involved. Network, network, network, network. It’s the greatest growth mechanism extant—it also is the greatest antidote to imposter syndrome. Because the more you learn, the more you gain from these contacts, these influences, these people from different organizations, different walks of life. Do as much of that as you can, and as your practice allows. It was really hard for me because, and no one around me would believe this, I have a well-earned reputation for volubility, but I’m actually an introvert. I’ve lived a very public life, because that was kind of like what occurred in my life. But I don’t know that that works for everyone, I think that you have to overcome that imposter syndrome and get involved, get into contact with people, some version of doing that. The second thing is to just be a lifelong learner.

**Kelly Oshiro** As the fellows have gone through the program, so many attorneys have been extraordinarily generous with their time in coming to speak with us. So as WLI turns 20 years old, why is it necessary to keep programs like WLI going for another 20 years—or longer?

**Ron Ward** Let me answer this in this manner—and I’ll pose it this way: Look at the present political climate. June 6th, 2025. That’s the answer to that question. And that’s part of our challenge. Alice Walker, the author, said, quite presciently and compellingly, “We are the people we have been waiting for.” Okay? I said earlier we’re in a collective effort to vanquish discrimination, inequity, and injustice in this society. We’re the people we’ve been waiting for. No one else is going to do it for us. In terms of affecting the changes we need to make, claiming and maintaining our appropriate place in this society, that we have earned through years of toil, subjugation, and service. All of – every one of the aspects of the underrepresented cadre that I talked about –women, lawyers of color, people of a different sexual orientation, lawyers with a disability. There’s a commonality there. So we have to persevere. We have to maintain the intended substance of the rule of law and continue to use it to open doors. We have to remember the history of our struggle and those who struggled, and we have to, as The Impressions—a famous soul group used to sing, in the 60s and the 70s: “Keep on pushing.” And never stop. We’ve been here before. And we’ve overcome. And we are going to do it again. But we have to keep on pushing.

**Kelly Oshiro** I think it’s safe to say that our class came together in January of 2025 a little down and about, but we all collectively have that fight and that desire to want to uplift our communities and to be agents of change. That to me, hopefully, honors your legacy and your

work with WLI. What do you hope future generations of lawyers take from your path, which is a very difficult path to follow?

**Ron Ward** Every one of us is an individual, and we all have to make that decision for ourselves. We've been blessed that a number of public figures have taken their time—these are people whose time could be spent anywhere—and they have given it to WLI because they see the rewards in this program and this effort. There's a lesson there that we need to keep in mind as we move forward. But every individual has to make their own decision, and I'm not going to quarrel with the decision that they make. But in order to continue to progress—collectively, indeed, individually—this is what's going to be necessary: someone is going to have to carry this water. And we've been blessed with some wonderful people—we've been blessed with a wonderful board and people who have stayed with WLI for years and years and years, with the three law schools, with the chairs of the program—James and Mary Yu, most notably. But also, early on, Ron Knox of the Garvey Schubert firm, Marcine Anderson, now retired District Court judge, Bill Garcia who at one point was a lead with Liberty Mutual. We've been blessed with these people along the way. They're marvelous people that—many of them come back year after year on the board. So I hope that that constitutes an exemplary example that will encourage people to continue to do what needs to be done. Cause again, no one's going to do it for us.

**Kelly Oshiro** We have all been given so much from attorneys like yourself and contributors to WLI, and we're so grateful for your efforts, and as well as those of—the time of—everyone's attorneys and everyone's busy, but everybody has been so gracious of making the time to come and speak with us and everyone is always so enthusiastic to meet us. And I'm always surprised that folks have read my bio from the website and it's really helped build my confidence and create a sense of community which I think is all a part of your vision. As we're closing out, reflecting back on that first session in January, our class watched a video of late Chief Justice Mary Fairhurst giving a talk to a class of WLI fellows. And that's what really inspired this entire project. Someone there had the foresight to document Justice Fairhurst's words. And our class was so inspired by that video and her lessons. One of the things that she said, and that was a quote of: "What would you do if you knew you could not fail?" So what does that quote from Chief Justice Fairhurst mean to you? What would you do if you knew you could not fail?

**Ron Ward** Well first of all, just a word about Mary Fairhurst— even the thought of her, at this time, is very, very moving. She was a remarkable individual. She loved this program. She was there from the very outset. She gave every bit of her support to it that she could year after year after year, even after her long battle with leukemia which eventually caused her to transition. She was a giving and selfless person. When I was about to become President of the Bar—which was a daunting proposition—she called me. I didn't even know her. She called me from the Temple of Justice in Olympia and invited me to dinner here in Seattle, and she took me to dinner which was a four hour affair. And she gave me the benefit of her wisdom and her experience, and I'll never forget it. And when I left that dinner, I felt a lot more confident about being successful in the undertaking that I was about to commence. That phrase means—it changes your very notion of what "failure" is—it means that your only failure, within the context of what we're committed to, is not aspiring, not engaging, not participating. That's everything. Just the effort of being involved means you cannot be a failure—that you can accomplish everything you aspire to

– it’s a completely different way of looking at this. It’s the antithesis of the imposter syndrome. So it was a kind of genius semantic to articulate to us, to these classes.

**Kelly Oshiro** WLI has undergone some change within the past couple of years. James Williams and Justice Yu for several years served as co-chairs of the program. But in the beginning of last year, Erica Evans and Craig Sims took over as co-chairs of WLI. Can you talk about that transition?

**Ron Ward** Well I’ve just been elated at what Craig and Erika have done since the inception of their stewardship of the program as co-chairs. As I indicated, we’ve been very blessed with regard to the leadership in this program. I have admiration that I can’t adequately articulate about what kind of human beings both Craig and Erika are – what kind of professionals they are, what kind of commitment it took for them – both of them have busy careers, or had busy careers. Erica is an Assistant U.S. Attorney in the DOJ’s Civil Rights Division. Craig is a major partner at one of the major law firms, Schroeter, Goldmark, and Bender in the Washington. To commit to devoting the thousands – not hundreds, but thousands – of hours that are necessary to continue to maintain this program, to continue to burnish it – its image – and its graduates – was a daunting and substantial undertaking. They have performed in a sterling fashion. Craig is one of the epitome servant leaders in the state. Not just in his professional life, but in his personal life. Erika—indicative of her commitment to service – is now running for City Attorney of the City of Seattle. She comes from a storied background. Her father was Lee Evans, an Olympian athlete. And we just couldn’t be more proud or more pleased with what they’ve been doing with the program of them and where the program continues to move under their leadership.

**Kelly Oshiro** Ron, I’d like to ask you one more question. We’ve talked a little bit about WLI’s connection with the WSBA, but can you explain how WLI’s connection to the three Washington law schools came to be— with University of Washington School of Law, Seattle University School of Law, and Gonzaga School of Law?

**Ron Ward** James and I –from the very outset—WSBA was sort of the foundation initially. But the three law schools were included and were meant to be included. This is where we gained our constituency comes from. And for most of the years, there have always been graduates from all three law schools. That’s been the intent from the very beginning of the program.

**Kelly Oshiro** Thank you so much, Ron. And thank you to our listeners for tuning in to *Voices That Move Us*. Be sure to check out our other episodes featuring prominent leaders in Washington’s legal community.