

Sarah Pendleton Interview Transcript

Yohana Valdez Welcome to *Voices That Move Us: Leaders, Legacy, and the Law*, a podcast celebrating 20 years of the Washington Leadership Institute—a visionary partnership between the Washington State Bar Association and the University of Washington School of Law. In each episode, we sit down with alumni of this program to explore how WLI has shaped their journeys and how they, in turn, are shaping the legal profession, their communities, and the future of leadership. I am your host, Yohana Valdez. Today, I'm honored to welcome **Sarah Pendleton**, a 2022 WLI graduate and the Clerk of the Washington Supreme Court. Sarah has built a distinguished career in public service and judicial administration, working at the highest levels of state government. As the Supreme Court Clerk, she ensures the smooth operation of Washington's highest court—a role that combines precision, legal acumen, and institutional leadership. Her path through WLI and the insights she brings from it offer a powerful reflection on what it means to lead with purpose and principle. **Sarah, thanks for joining us.**

Sarah Pendleton Thank you for having me. That was way too nice but thank you for that introduction.

Yohana Valdez She's modest as well—so wonderful. Let's go ahead and jump into our questions. I'd love to start first by learning about your WLI experience. Can I ask what drew you to apply to the Washington Leadership Institute?

Sarah Pendleton Yeah, so when I started as the Deputy Clerk in 2021 at the Supreme Court, the Clerk of the Court at the time, Erin Lennon, had a few friends who had participated in the program, and she thought that I would be a good candidate. She really encouraged me to apply. You know, when I came out of law school—especially because I didn't finish law school at Seattle U; I was out of the country—I didn't have a lot of connections in the state, especially in the legal community. So, I thought it was a great opportunity to join WLI and get to meet some of the leaders in the state in the legal field. And I also came from state government, and oftentimes when you're in state government and you're in an agency—especially one like DSHS, where I was—it is very insulated. You don't get to meet a lot of attorneys doing other things besides what you're doing. And so, I knew a lot of procurement and contracting professionals, but that was about it. I would say those are the main reasons why I decided to pursue it and apply. And I'm glad that I did.

Yohana Valdez That's great. Can you share how WLI shaped your understanding of leadership, especially given that you're a woman of color in the legal profession?

Sarah Pendleton Yeah. So, I'm sure you've heard this—it's kind of a Justice Yu saying. Justice Yu would always say to us, "You belong." And I think it's the belonging—that's really what it did for me—that made me feel like I was worthy of being in the room. I think as a woman and a woman of color, that's just kind of the norm. You feel imposter syndrome. You feel like, "Why am I in this position?" "How did I get so lucky?" And at least for me, I would question, like, "Am I the right person?" "Do I deserve this?" "Did I work hard enough to get here?" And I wouldn't say that ever goes away, but I think WLI really instilled in me this real belief that I took

in and internalized—that I do belong, and I do deserve to be in the places where I am. So, I think that was the biggest impact for me of the program.

Yohana Valdez That is so interesting to me, Sarah, because as I was drafting questions to ask you, of course I asked myself that: What have I gained so far in these seven months? And that was actually the answer that I came to as well—that sense of belonging, that you deserve to be at the table. So, I'm really happy to hear that reflected back from you because that kind of further validates my own experience. Thank you for sharing that. So, you've worked in high-level judicial and policy spaces. I'm wondering if WLI—the confidence that you're talking about, gaining from WLI—I don't know if you would call it confidence, but that sense of belonging—if that has carried on in those types of spaces as well?

Sarah Pendleton Oh yeah, absolutely. I think it goes back to this—you belong. Of course, there are still days where I, you know, see my name on an opinion and it says, "Clerk of the Court," and I'm like, What? That's not me. And I wonder how I got here—whether people look at me and think that I deserve it, or I'm too young, or I'm too Asian, or I'm too whatever I am. But I think it did. It does. I didn't expect it to give you this sense of belonging, but it really does. It makes you feel like you've earned what you have. It's not just given to you—which I think a lot of people assume. Or as maybe little girls, we are supposed to learn to be humble and not think you deserve it, and to go, you know, melt into the background. But ... I think the exercise that we did when I—and I don't know if you still do this—but with Nick Brown, the current AG, he came in and did an exercise with us where we had to do a presentation in front of everyone about ourselves. And, you know, that's like the hardest thing to do—is talk about yourself. And it was really impactful for me. It really made me feel like I could step into a room and capture other people's attention and talk about myself, which is not something we're inclined to do generally, I think, as minority women. But it gave me that confidence. The other thing it gave me—I think that a lot of these really impactful leaders, these people who are established in the legal community—they're part of this program, and they're there with the intention of helping you. Like, they are there purely to help you move through this culture, this knowledge sphere. And I think having them be the cheerleaders to build you up and say, I support you—I don't think I felt that community. I think if I didn't go through the program and I applied to be the Clerk, I would have more doubts about myself. But going through the program and creating these relationships with Justice Yu and with attorneys who practice in this court, and them saying, You're a great candidate for this role and We think you'd do a great job in this position—it did so much for me in giving me the confidence to be able to walk into a room and know that I deserve to be in this job. So, it is a long-winded answer, but that would be my response.

Yohana Valdez That's okay. That's what we're here for—we're here for those kinds of answers. I'm curious about that assignment from not-then-the-Attorney General. What was the assignment? You had to speak about yourselves? Were you promoting yourselves? Were you giving kind of your bio, or what was the—

Sarah Pendleton I'm not going to lie to you. I don't remember exactly what it was. I remember that it had to do with us talking about ourselves in a short amount of time and making it, you know—at that time he was talking about politicians and how they make these concise—these

speeches that are concise and persuasive. And it was an exercise like that, where we each got up and had a limited amount of time to present. But I—to be honest—I don't remember the subject.

Yohana Valdez It sounds like—well, it sounds like the purpose, the subject was you, and the purpose was maybe to—maybe to justify your place at the table or to sell yourself as being the person who deserves to be in this space. That's wonderful. So, we're talking about you being the Clerk of the Court of the Supreme Court of the State of Washington. And I'm wondering, for those listeners who might not fully understand the scope of your job, could you share with us what your role entails and why it's important?

Sarah Pendleton I don't think a lot of people know what the Clerk of a court does generally, but the Clerk of the Supreme Court is kind of a different beast. So, I will try to summarize it—I think I could use the whole 30 minutes to talk about all the things. But in a nutshell, we are the air traffic control of the Court. So, when filing comes in, we are the first face, the first voice, the first letter that a party receives in a case. So, I think a lot about us being what people take away from the Court experience. We have to give them—we have to open the door for them and welcome them in, and understand what they're asking for, and translate it into how the Court does procedure, and then get it through the Court in the right way, in front of the right people. Does it go to the Commissioner's Office? Does it go to the Justices? Does it go to five of them or all of them? And so, a lot of my job at the front end is to do a triage of—and determine—where does a filing go? What type of case is this? What court is it coming from? We have 20-plus types of cases here at the Court. So, a lot of my time is spent doing an analysis of what it is. And we have pro se folks that come to the Court—they've only had experience at the lower court—and so they file things that are filed at a lower court. And so, we have to figure out what is this most similar to—type of thing. Myself and my Deputy Clerk are considered quasi-judicial officers. So, we do have to comply with the Code of Judicial Conduct. And we enter rulings on motions, mostly administrative motions that are filed by parties that, you know, it would take way too long to refer those to the Court, or the Court is very busy writing opinions and things like that. So, things like motions for extensions of time, motions to file over-length, sometimes to consolidate cases—those are all on our plate, and we rule on those. And then we correspond. So, per day, I probably write a good 30 letters to parties telling them what the next step in a case is. I try to do plain language letters that explain to them what the next steps are, what they need to file next, and then I'll set due dates based on the procedure of the Court. We also do all the orders, and we docket all the cases. So, there are case managers—or docket clerks, as they're known in other courts—here in our office. And they review every filing to make sure it's in compliance with the rules. They docket and set them so that parties can see what is said and what is due. And then we correspond with the Commissioner's Office, with the chambers that are assigned a case—all of those things to make sure all of the things that need to be done are done—so we're the air traffic control. The other thing that we do that is unique—I think there are only a couple of states that do this—is the Clerk's Office also manages the admissions process for the WSBA, Washington State Bar. So, I sign every admission certificate for new attorneys—for limited licenses, limited practitioners, Rule 9 interns, in-house counsel, foreign law consultants. I review and process all of those. And then I'm the record keeper for the state of all of the admission files for attorneys. So, we have a vault here where I'm required to maintain all of the records. And if the Bar actually doesn't have them anymore once you're admitted, the only place you can get

them is here. So, we're the keeper of the files as well. A little bit of everything—quasi-judicial, record holders, letter writers, composers, and things like that. That's what we do.

Yohana Valdez Well, you know—and the second part of that question had to do with why does it matter? And I think that you touched on this a bit. I was just thinking about your issues that I see from your career that are important to you—access to justice. And so, I think you've touched on this with the letter-writing aspect, like communicating with parties, especially with pro se parties. Are there other areas in which you get to really impact access to justice, do you think, through this role?

Sarah Pendleton Yes, absolutely. Our office manages the rulemaking process and issuing the orders. And so, I'm pretty well acquainted with what the rule process looks like. Our office has headed up a lot of proposed changes to the Rules of Appellate Procedure to make them more understandable. When lawyers can't understand how to do something, you know there's a problem. There's also a lack of materials or help at the appellate level. There are no guidebooks. There are very few attorneys who are really well acquainted with the appellate courts. And it is hard to navigate. I can't even imagine navigating it as a pro se individual. And I can't—I don't know how people do it when they are limited English proficiency. Language access is something that's really important to me. Myself and the clerk that was here before I took over—we drafted the first Washington State Appellate Access Plan. And it was granted 9-0 by the court and adopted. Now they're in the process of working with the Language Access Commission to create a subcommittee that's going to be leading the effort in implementing new processes to make the appellate courts more accessible in terms of language. So that's a big part of it. We really get to be at the table when we talk about policies. Our court not only oversees our court internally, but we are the head of the judicial branch. The Chief Justice is the head of the judicial branch. So, I feel like I have an obligation to speak up and use my voice where I can make an impact. And you know, this court doesn't accept a lot of cases. So generally, people are going to feel disappointed. And so we have to be kicking the door open for them, giving them all the information that they need to be able to pursue their case here, and making them feel validated and heard—even when it likely won't end up the way they want it. A case won't end up the way they want it. But if at the end of the day they feel heard, and they feel like it was a just, fair, accessible process, you're making a huge impact. You're making people feel like they can come here, and it's a place where they can air their grievances or something bad that happened to them—and they can get some type of... at least be heard, even if it doesn't get taken up by the court. So, I think it's a really important place. We are the face of the court.

Yohana Valdez Let me ask you—going back to your leadership journey, because this podcast is dealing with legacy—I wonder how you define legacy in your own leadership journey. And then the second part to that, if I may, is: What are you most proud of so far?

Sarah Pendleton Yeah, I think in terms of legacy, it is really important to me that I welcome people in. I think as an attorney, your initial reaction when a young person asks you about being a lawyer is like, "Oh, it's really hard. Like, law school is awful." And I feel like it puts people off. But I feel like the people that I've met—where I feel like these people are going to make a difference in the world—were the people in my cohort at WLI. Everybody's in a different area. Everyone's interested in different things. Everyone walked a different path to get there. But you

can just tell that they're going to make an impact. So I want to open that up—to make it feel accessible. I want people whose parents didn't go to law school—mine didn't—and grandparents aren't, you know, judges or already attorneys... I want them to feel like it's something that they can do, and that they belong. And so, I think that's a big part of the legacy I want to leave. So, when I have an opportunity to talk to young attorneys, I try to do it as much as possible. We just talked with the ARC program—the entering 1Ls. They were three days into law school and came to the court last week. Myself, Justice Mungia, the Chief Justice, and one of the law clerks, Justin Lowe, were able to meet with them and really talk to them about what it's like—and that they belong there. And we talked a lot about, what do you do when people question you about being there? Or challenge whether or not you deserve to be there? Or say something that's passive-aggressive about you being in the ARC program? Or, you know, not having taken the traditional route? We talked a lot about that. That is something that's really important to me. If I get an opportunity to meet with the Page program at the legislature, and they come over, I try to be honest and talk to them about my experience there. I think honesty and openness and being welcoming to the new generation is so important. And I hope that's the legacy that I leave—just showing them that you deserve to be there.

What I'm most proud of... I'll talk about what I'm most proud of myself for, and then I'll talk about my job—because that's easy. You know, that's something on your resume. I would say, for me, I'm most proud of the fact that I never let anything pigeonhole me. And I'm going to be totally, blatantly, like, totally honest in this conversation. When I came to this court, I knew nothing about the courts. I'd never practiced in the court. I knew nothing about the Rules of Appellate Procedure. I wasn't quite sure about what the structure of the court system was in the state. But it was really interesting. And I read the description, and I saw myself in it—even though my job wasn't directly applicable. I knew that there were things in my last job that could maybe not directly, but at least kind of fill what they were looking for in a deputy clerk. And really, what the clerk at the time—and I could read it in the posting—wanted was someone who had experience leading teams, who was passionate about social justice, who understood how race affects how people have access to the courts. And that really showed through in her job description. It wasn't just like a hoity-toity, you know, ivory tower type of thing—and she wasn't that type of clerk. So, I read that, and I realized how important it is how you write your job descriptions—because you invite different people to the table, rather than just someone who's done what you're "supposed" to do, been at the court for a long time. Not saying that those people are not qualified—they're extremely qualified. I would say I was probably the least qualified in terms of direct experience. But I translated. I was in procurement and contracting for seven years in a state agency. Never been to court. I just—I took a shot. I called a person who knew what the clerk's office did, got an idea of really what are the nuts and bolts of what they do, and how can my skills that I developed in this other area of law—how can those translate? And I wrote my application that way. And I got an interview. And my family members, I kid you not, were like, "There's no way they're going to interview you. There's no way. But good for you. Apply—it looks cool." Even my parents were like, "There's no way." And I got a call. I got an interview. And my best friends that are lawyers were like, "You've been in procurement?" Of course, they were supportive, but they were like, "Don't be sad. They're probably being nice. You got an interview." And I got the job the next day. And here I am, four years in, and I'm now the Clerk of the Court. And I love it. Like, this is what I was meant to do. But if you let the system dictate where you go and keep you from changing course when you realize you're not on the

right course—like, you're screwing yourself. I think that it's so important. So, I hope to leave that message as maybe part of my legacy. And it is what I'm most proud of for my own life.

At the court, I think the language access plan is my proudest. I'm also really proud of internal things. My team is super strong. I feel like I give an opportunity to the women who work in this office—it's all women, except for the Deputy Clerk—to give me their honest feedback about how they think systems are working. None of them are attorneys, but some of them have proposed rule changes. They know the cases inside and out. And I'm really proud of the team that we've built, and that everyone feels empowered and capable of improving the process. They all come from different walks of life, different levels of education. And it's really amazing. So—internally—and then the language access plan is hugely important to me. I speak French and Japanese, and I know what it feels like to live in another country and feel completely powerless because you don't know how things work. There's all this bureaucracy, and then you can't even read the rule because the rule is so convoluted. So, I really hope to continue expanding it. I hope to be invited to be on the subcommittee so that I can make changes from inside. And yeah, I would say that's what I am most proud of.

Yohana Valdez Sarah; I wasn't expecting to get teary-eyed. I just really appreciate your honesty about how little you felt like you could get... well. I'm sorry. You maybe didn't maybe feel like you couldn't get the job, but you admitted that you didn't know anything about it directly, but you could look based on the job description and think about how were your skills and your knowledge and your passions transferable to this role. And so, it sounds like curiosity, tenacity, and a belief in yourself were like the main drivers for getting you to where you are today in that role.

Sarah Pendleton Absolutely. But the whole time, I'm like, what am I doing? They're not going to hire me. But sometimes you just got to throw it at the wall and see if it sticks.

Yohana Valdez Love it. Yeah. That's wonderful. Okay, so we're just going to wind ourselves down here, thinking about the past and thinking about the future. I'm curious—looking back at your younger self, maybe before law school even—what would you tell yourself if you could go back to that version of you? What would you tell pre-law school Sarah about the path ahead?

Sarah Pendleton So many things. I think law school is designed, you know, it's like—historic, historical—you know, it's like: this is the way it's done. I mean, that's why law schools exist, right? It's like this system you're supposed to go through, and you're supposed to apply for the summer externships, and you're supposed to do all these things. And then, you know, law firm life. There's just like an algorithm that they teach you that you're supposed to learn. And I wish I didn't care so much about that when I was in law school. I think I second-guessed a lot of the decisions I made, or I didn't do the things because I thought I wasn't good enough. So, I wish I could have shown myself a glimpse of what my future me would have looked like to give myself more confidence. But I was, like, the epitome of imposter syndrome. I just did not think I belonged in the room. Everyone seemed smarter than me. Never got a Cali in a class. I did okay, you know? I did good enough, but I wasn't the top of the class. And I kind of prioritized going abroad—doing an externship at the UN Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia—really leaning into

my French and doing that. Studied French for a summer. I didn't do the traditional route, and I'd pat myself on the back for that, because I think it got me to where I am.

Yohana Valdez Would she have believed that you would have ended up here?

Sarah Pendleton No. No. No. Probably no. I also thought, you know, when you go to law school, you think it's all about the money, right? You want to go and make that money. I realized really quickly that it made me profoundly unhappy when that was the reason. I don't think I really found my passion until I got into my working life. And I think that's why I pivoted so much. I'm just—and I think it's okay to not know what you want to do. And I think what they expect you to do is know what you want to do. I think it's okay to pivot mid-career and figure out: does this make me happy? No, not at all. So, I started in private law. It made me very, very unhappy. And it kind of made my whole life view flip upside down. I thought I wanted one thing, and that's absolutely not what I wanted. So, yeah, never could I have ever predicted that I would be talking to you in this position right now, working in Olympia—just nothing. The one thing I would probably criticize myself about, which I think is related—because I think it had to do with the lack of confidence—is: I didn't put myself out there. I didn't sign up for moot court because I thought I would look stupid. I didn't sign up for any of those types of activities. I didn't go to networking events. And I am jealous of the people that I know now, that are incredibly successful attorneys, and I look up to to this day, that really created these solid relationships with people when they were in law school. You know, I went to school with Cynthia Delostrinos, who was the head of innovation at AOC. And she really created a relationship with Justice Yu when she was in law school. Alexis Delacruz, Diego Rondon—all these people. Many of them went through WLI. They created these relationships with these really amazing, strong people that built them up. You know, I wish I would have taken advantage of that when I was younger. I really needed it. I really could have done something with it. And I was too scared to put myself out there. And it's not too late. Even if you go through law school and you're not the greatest, you can always get better at it. And I would say I didn't get better at it until I was an attorney, and I was working. Everybody develops at a different rate.

Yohana Valdez I hope you'll be sharing that as you continue to meet prospective—not, maybe prospective—law students or ones that are three days into law school. I think that's super valuable advice that I don't think I've ever heard before, actually, in my—you know, in many years of practicing. So, write that one down. So, for the last question, Sarah, looking ahead. You know that the year is 2025, and you know... the narrative, you know the narrative and the situation for initiatives like WLI—programs that are based in diversity—and I wonder what you hope for WLI looking forward. You know, I was going to ask the question looking five years, ten years—you know, we're at the 20-year anniversary of WLI this year—and I got a little... I felt reluctant to ask about the next 20 years, because right now that seems maybe a little dangerously optimistic, I would say. Feel free to answer about what you wish for WLI in 20 years, or just in the immediate or near future.

Sarah Pendleton Sure, I think it'll still be around. I think it'll still be going strong. Because the people who are part of it are extraordinary people. People who have a foot in all different areas. That's what I love about WLI. We had immigration attorneys. We had government employees. We had in-house counsel. People who are seeking judicial office. I feel like it reaches out so far.

It's creating this really strong net. And I think—I hope—that in 20 years the program continues to engage with the alumni, to band together with the attorneys that are in the program, and to hold the wall, right? Like, just to hold it. Hold the water from breaking it down—you know, be the dam. I don't have a lot of optimism either based on the current national landscape, but when you look at the nine people who are on the Supreme Court, who are administering the state's judicial system, it is the most—or one of, if not the most—diverse benches at the Supreme Court level in the nation. And I don't see our state backing down at all. I think the people that we have chosen to lead us are fighting the good fight. And I think if the alumni continue being involved to hold up this program—to keep the waters from breaking it—I think that it's going to thrive. Yeah. I hope they keep reaching out. I hope they keep visiting the other side of the state. I think there's a lot of important work being done on the east side of the state. I loved going to Spokane and meeting the attorneys and the programs that are being administered over on the other side of the state. I think a lot of Seattle people tend to think that that's all of Washington. It's not. It's a lot of important immigration work, a lot of important work—advocacy work—that's being done on the other side of the state. And I hope that they continue involving attorneys from the entire state to make it stronger—to create the stronger net—so that we can protect our judicial system and our legal system.

Yohana Valdez Thank you. Thank you so much, Sarah. Well, that was Sarah Pendleton, Clerk of the Washington Supreme Court and a proud member, as you've heard, of the WLI Class of 2022. Her story is a vivid reminder of the power of inclusive leadership, the importance of community, and the long arc of legacy that WLI continues to build. If you're a lawyer in Washington looking to lead with impact, or someone who believes in the power of equity in our profession, we invite you to learn more about the Washington Leadership Institute and consider how you can be part of its future. This has been *Voices That Move Us*. Thank you for listening.