

Francis Adewale Transcript

Alex Bejarán Estévez Welcome listeners to *Voices That Move Us*. This podcast is hosted by the 2025 fellows of the Washington Leadership Institute. WLI is a leadership development program in Washington State that seeks to recruit, train, and develop traditionally underrepresented attorneys for future leadership positions. We're 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 **Francis Adewale**, the president-elect of the Board of Governors of the Washington State Bar Association. He is a career public defender who practices in Spokane and has deep roots in his community and in the legal community of Washington State more generally. He serves on the board of the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, is an adjunct professor at Whitworth University and Gonzaga Law School, and a WLI alum of the class of 2009. **Francis, thank you so much for joining us.**

Francis Adewale Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to be here.

Alex Bejarán Estévez Thank you. I want to start our time together helping our listeners get to know you a little bit better. Would you mind sharing with us a little bit about what originally drove you to the practice of law?

Francis Adewale I grew up in Nigeria. I was born in southwest Nigeria, and in 1983 there was a military coup. On the day of the coup, my grandfather took me and my younger brother to his farm, as he did every year during the holidays. He didn't know there was a coup. When there's a military push in Nigeria, they impose curfews and stop anyone from going anywhere. There was martial music on the radio, but no announcement. So we were on our way when we were accosted by soldiers. They stopped us, beat my grandfather, and arrested him—and dragged me along with him. My little brother, who was smarter than I, dropped everything and ran home to tell my dad.

Alex Bejarán Estévez And how old were you when you were arrested?

Francis Adewale I was about 14 years old. My brother was nine. That experience stayed with us. It was the beginning of our journey toward law. I was arrested and taken to the military guard room with my grandfather. We were locked up until my dad came. He had a lawyer friend who helped get us released. That lawyer explained the situation to the officers—some of whom were drunk with power and alcohol. That experience taught me and my little brother what it means to stand for the law. Today, I'm a lawyer. My brother is also a lawyer in Nigeria, focused on civil rights law. That searing experience shaped both of us.

Alex Bejarán Estévez That's incredible. Thank you so much for sharing that. Would you mind telling us a little bit more about your journey as you became a lawyer? How did you first get barred in Nigeria? Did you get barred here in the United States?

Francis Adewale I was a lawyer in Nigeria for seven and a half years. I won the green card lottery and came to the U.S. in 1999. The lottery does not give you anything. I knew no one. A friend connected me with someone in Maryland, Washington D.C., so I came and I stayed with them while preparing for the bar exam. New York and Washington State allowed lawyers from common law countries—like Nigeria, India, Canada—to sit for the bar exam if they had practiced for seven years. I applied and passed on my first attempt. That was unique. That surprised many colleagues who had gone to law school in the U.S. After that, I was living in Washington D.C. and tried to find work in Seattle, but no firm would give me a chance—largely because of my accent. A friend said, “Why are you trying Seattle? Spokane is also in Washington.” I didn’t even know Spokane existed. I walked around law firms in Spokane. One of them is where I work today. They said they had no openings but would let me know. Two weeks later, they called. A lawyer was leaving, and they offered me the spot. I asked for two weeks to move from D.C., and I’ve been in Spokane ever since—almost 25 years now. I never left.

Alex Bejarán Estévez And you’ve been there ever since?

Francis Adewale Yes. I’ve been with the City of Spokane Public Defender’s Office. About a year in, I was doing a trial as a temp seasonal employee. The County Public Defender’s Office director—now Federal Magistrate John Rogers—was in the courtroom. After I won a not guilty verdict, he offered me a permanent job. I told my boss, and she asked for a few hours to talk to the city council. Within 24 hours, she got a permanent position created for me. That’s why I stayed with the City. I could have worked for the County, but that’s how I started practicing criminal law in Spokane. I have been able to do a couple of things since then to change the practice.

Alex Bejarán Estévez That’s cool. Do you have a specific area of criminal law that you prefer to practice?

Francis Adewale I do misdemeanor criminal defense. That’s what we handle in the city. I have some colleagues who handle felony cases. After a few years, I realized many of our clients were serving life sentences—20 to 30 days at a time. It was heartbreaking. Around the same time, 2008, I got invited to apply to WLI. Through the help of George Tompkins and Nancy Isserlis, I joined the program. WLI opened my eyes. I came back ready to quit. I couldn’t keep doing the same job. You were basically an undertaker. I was representing the grandchildren of the grandparents I had represented years earlier. I was not happy. That December, I saw the list of homeless people who had died that year—seven or eight of them were my clients.

Alex Bejarán Estévez That has to be difficult.

Francis Adewale It was rough. WLI helped me see that being a lawyer isn’t just about pushing files. The community expects more. You can solve problems one file at a time—or through community advocacy. I told my boss I was ready to resign. I didn’t care if I got another job. Cathy Knox—who has since passed—told me not to give up. She assured me there is hope. She said they were working on a program and invited me to help build it.

Alex Bejarán Estévez Can you talk more about the community's expectations of attorneys?

Francis Adewale WLI helped me see that leadership is not just a 9-5 job. You can change community, people's lives. That's how we started Spokane Community Court. Judge Logan had the vision, and my colleagues, including Adam Papini, and I helped build it. Fifteen years later, it's inspired similar courts across the country. It's a therapeutic court focused on homeless individuals—addressing root causes instead of jail time. If they want it, not everyone wants the therapeutic process, it saves money and changes lives. It costs more to put someone in jail than to house them in a nice hotel. Other states have looked to Spokane for inspiration—Oregon, Texas, Wisconsin, California, Utah. WLI helped me look beyond my job, be accountable and give back to my community. In that way, I am helping myself. Where my community is healthy, I am healthy. Where the community is whole, I am whole.

Alex Bejarán Estévez Wow. Thank you so much for sharing that. I want to touch on one more thing about Spokane before we talk more about WLI. You've been in practice for about 25 years. How have you seen the Spokane legal community—and Washington's legal community—change over that time?

Francis Adewale We're constantly evolving. The legal process responds better to crisis than to prevention. We wait for a crisis, then throw things at the wall to see what sticks. As time passes, we forget how we got there and repeat the same mistakes. But my hope is in the next generation. My generation didn't want to just win trials—we wanted to address root causes. I won trials, but my clients were back in jail weeks later. The victory was my victory, but we did not address the root causes for the clients. That's not progress.

Alex Bejarán Estévez So would you say there's a pre-therapeutic court Spokane and a post-therapeutic court Spokane?

Francis Adewale Absolutely. For me, there's a clear before and after. Community advocacy became more important than just one case at a time. Serving on the Justice Board helped me see the connection between criminal and civil legal systems. In criminal cases, *Gideon* guarantees counsel. In civil cases, if you're poor, you're on your own. Civil legal aid is underfunded, and that affects criminal justice outcomes. We're just putting a plaster on a wound without treating the cause. I see this on the Access to Justice Board. That's why I'm passionate about civil legal aid—it's essential.

Alex Bejarán Estévez Absolutely. I'm a civil legal aid attorney too, so I understand that gulf in access. Let's talk more about your experience with WLI. One of its biggest focus areas is helping fellows develop their leadership style. How has your leadership style evolved throughout your career—before and after WLI?

Francis Adewale Let the record reflect—I took off my glasses and wiped my brow. WLI helped me see that leadership isn't just about becoming a director or partner. It's about impacting lives and communities. During my WLI year in 2008, our coordinators were Judge Mary Yu and James Williams. At an event with WSBA leaders, then-president (now Justice) Sal Mungia said, "You have a unique opportunity to help your profession as bar leaders." I stood up and asked, "Is

there hope for someone like me?” I was born in a small village in Africa. I had no connections. Sal looked me in the eye and said, “Yes. This country is available to everyone.” That moment gave me hope. I returned to Spokane ready to lead. I told my boss, “If I’m only going to be restricted to doing this job, I may not last. But if you let me work with the community, I promise my job won’t suffer.” And it never did. Later, when Sal Mungia became my predecessor as chair of the Access to Justice Board, he taught me something profound. He said, “The minority should always have their say. The majority will have the vote, but never forget that the minority should have a voice.” That stuck with me. Sometimes we’re so convinced of the righteousness of our cause that we stop listening. But minority wisdom today may become majority wisdom tomorrow. Leadership means listening—not predatory listening, where you’re just waiting to pounce on a weakness—but genuine, productive listening. In English law, we call it *audi alteram partem*—hear the other side. You must be willing to listen.

Alex Bejarán Estévez So, not the type of listening we sometimes do in court to figure out the weakness of the other side?

Francis Adewale Exactly. When I train young attorneys for trial, I tell them: put down your pen. Listen to what opposing counsel is saying. If you’re only listening to pick apart their argument, you’re missing the bigger picture. The cases I’ve won were because I listened—really listened—to the prosecutor’s argument. It helped me understand the totality of the case, not just my side. Listening is essential. My leadership development has been deeply shaped by that lesson from WLI.

Alex Bejarán Estévez Thank you for sharing that. We have just a couple more questions. I want to move us to talk a little bit about current events. As you know, there have been a lot of immigration protests happening in Spokane. Can you give listeners a little insight into what the protests are about and what the police response has been?

Francis Adewale This is an ongoing situation. A few weeks ago, protestors were demonstrating against ICE arrests in Spokane. I didn’t know the protest was happening that day—I was working in my garden. Suddenly, I got a call from a 12-year-old girl. She said, “My mom told me to call you if she ever got in trouble. Please bring her home.” Her mom was Angel, a Native American activist I’ve worked with through a nonprofit. I ran out of the house in my pajamas. My wife stopped me and said, “You can’t go to jail dressed like that.” I changed quickly and joined my colleagues—(WLI Fellow) Sarah, Morgan Maxey, and others—who were already there. We stayed until 2 a.m. making sure everyone was released. Just this week, we learned that the U.S. Attorney for Eastern Washington is filing federal charges against nine of the protestors. Other attorneys are stepping up. I played a small role—others played bigger ones. It reminded me of what we went through during military rule in Nigeria, where the law didn’t matter—it was the will of those in charge.

Alex Bejarán Estévez It must feel like a full circle moment—in a bad way.

Francis Adewale Yes, in a very bad way. But this is still America. If we focus on the rule of law, we can stay safe. Everyone believes in the justice system. We, as attorneys, must do our job—and teach the next generation. Just like the generation of the ’60s with Dr. King, we must

speak up. Even in crisis, I see hope. We cannot afford to be incurable pessimists. If hope is lost, we become a community of suffering—especially for those under assault, like the immigrant community. I serve on the board of the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project. It breaks my heart every time we meet. The Tacoma Immigration Center has one attorney for hundreds of people. People are sleeping on top of each other. I don't care if you're documented or undocumented—human dignity defines justice. When I explain to someone that they don't have a case, they accept it—because I've taken the time to explain. But when someone says, "Justice doesn't matter. I get to do what I want to you," that's not right. We must stand up for the rule of law—and for those who don't have a voice. We are privileged. We are male. We are lawyers. We know where our next meal is coming from. Many people—Black, brown, white—don't know where they'll sleep tonight. One of my clients woke up under a bridge, stole an apple because he was hungry, and was charged with theft. That's a gross misdemeanor. The city was willing to pay to jail him for 364 days. It would've been cheaper to house him in the Davenport Hotel. But if we don't address the root causes, we're just spinning our wheels. America is supposed to be a beacon of hope. When I was a child, a Peace Corps volunteer came to my village and inspired me. They showed me a picture of a country where people fought for justice. I told myself, "If I ever get the chance, I want to go there. I want to be a citizen of that country." We can't give up hope. We still have a lot of work to do.

Alex Bejarán Estévez Absolutely. And on the note of hope, at the close of all our interviews, we ask our guests to share some forward-thinking last words. Francis, what is something that gives you hope about our country, our legal community, or our lives?

Francis Adewale What gives me hope is a quote from Mr. Daniel Webster: "Justice is the greatest interest of man. It is the ligament which holds all civilized beings and civilized natures together. Wherever a temple stands, and so long as it is duly honored, there is a foundation for security, general happiness, and the improvement and progress of all races." As long as we keep fighting for justice, that gives me hope.

Alex Bejarán Estévez Thank you so much for your time, Francis. I really appreciate it. Thank you for listening to *Voices That Move Us*. Check out our other episodes featuring prominent leaders of the Washington legal community.