

LEARNING CURVE

8 LEGAL SECTOR LESSONS

Learned from The Portia Project Podcast

Inspiring the next generation of women seeking a legal career path.

BY M.C. SUNGAILA

Christine Durham, the first woman justice and chief justice of the Utah Supreme Court, encountered job notices stating: Only men on law review need apply.

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Christine Byrd, who graduated law school in the 1970s, recounted that very few judges would hire female law clerks, and that a few major law firms would hire women for short-term positions, but not for partner-track positions.

Despite challenging beginnings, these and other women have attained great heights in their careers. Their stories show a lot of progress over the last 50 years.

As an appellate lawyer who has argued before the highest courts and led appellate departments at some of the country's largest law firms, and the creator and host of the

award-winning Portia Project® podcast, I have interviewed nearly 200 women about their careers: federal judges, state supreme court and appellate justices, trial judges, general counsel, C-suite executives, law firm managing partners, nonprofit and government leaders, and entrepreneurs. The podcast chronicles the storied careers of women judges, lawyers, and leaders in the United States—women diverse in their experiences and roles, each of whom entered the legal profession or business world at various points over the last half century. Their stories provide guidance for women navigating challenges and careers today.

1 Be intentional about career choices

Ann Kappler, General Counsel of Prudential Financial, chose one position because she wanted to gain new skills from the leader of that company's legal department.

Christine Byrd moved to the U.S. attorney's office to get trial experience; these trial skills would also put her in a position to obtain a law firm partnership afterwards. Her experience in the U.S. attorney's office also prepared her for the trial bench.

Arkansas Supreme Court Justice Rhonda Wood, as a practicing lawyer, became an expert on the new HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) medical privacy laws; since the laws were new, she did not have to compete with lawyers practicing longer than she had, and quickly became the go-to lawyer in the area.

2 Be open to new opportunities

We all have goals and plans. But don't miss out on new opportunities along the way. Even if those opportunities look a lot like hard work.

Alaska Supreme Court Justice Susan Carney had served her entire career as a public defender. Then one of the justices for the court on which she clerked suggested she apply for a position on the court—and so did many others who had seen her legal work. She had never considered serving on the bench before, but she applied, and she is there now.



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3 Layer your experiences and skills

Washington State Supreme Court Justice Raquel Montoya-Lewis was the first Native American, and first tribal judge, to join her court. She brings her unique cultural understanding to questions of state law. Jennifer Friend, who at times lived in a motel room with her family growing up, now brings her personal experience as well as her advocacy skills as a litigator and law firm partner to her role as CEO of the nonprofit Project Hope Alliance, which supports and serves homeless youth.

4 Take the leap

The Portia Project® pioneered the legal storytelling podcast genre for women. When I started, I knew nothing about podcast design, production, or funding. But I knew women's stories were important and needed to be shared. I took the leap.

5 Persist

Never ever give up. Hawaii Supreme Court Justice Sabina McKenna applied to the bench nearly 10 times before being appointed to the trial court and ultimately ascending to her state's highest court. Elizabeth Walker of West Virginia's highest court found herself caught up in a courtwide impeachment campaign immediately after joining the court; she triumphed, and the next year became chief justice.

6 Reflect on what success looks like for you—not what others say it is

Law students often see one path to success: a position at a large law firm. But there is no such thing as a single path. And what success looks like for you may be very different from what others want, or what you think you should want. Listen to what makes your heart sing, where you can make the biggest difference. And be open to that changing.

7 The path to success only looks clear after you have traversed it

After the fact, a particular career path may seem inevitable. But in the middle of your career, the path can zigzag and appear haphazard. Women's career paths may be particularly jagged. Judge Christine Byrd noted that women lawyers often must make many more lateral moves throughout their careers because, as she explained it, people tend to see a few years ahead for women; for men, their sense of possibility is not so limited.

8 Pay it forward

The way to recognize and thank those who have mentored you is to mentor others. Patricia Hunt Holmes, one of the first women partners at Vinson & Elkins LLP, left her practice to a woman of counsel when she retired—and in the process helped her become partner. By doing the same, women can help ensure the next generation's success. 🌟

FOR more information



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