

Member Perspective: Justice Susan Owens

By the Hon. Susan Owens, Washington Supreme Court Justice

In 1981, I was living in the wilderness that is Lake Ozette, staying home to nurse my daughter Sunny. One day I received a "Notice of Public Hearing" from my former law partner. It was a hearing notice from the Board of County Commissioners requesting input about whether they should form a new Judicial District Court based in Forks. I attended the hearing and was asked if I would apply for judge. I did and was appointed by the Board to serve as Clallam County District Court II's first elected judge (that came in November 1982).

I never expected to be a judge at such a young age, but the opportunity was there and so was I. I was elected to five terms, until I left for the Supreme Court in 2001.

In 2000, my kids were out of the house more or less, and I was about to serve a year as President of the District & Municipal Court Judges' Association (DMCJA). We had been working on several

important justice initiatives, and when no sitting Judge announced for the two open seats on the Washington State Supreme Court, I quickly began to recruit appropriate candidates. Everyone I approached said, "You should do it!"

I sought a lot of advice from long-time colleagues and friends, but couldn't decide for sure until late June when I realized that the primary fell on my father's 80th birthday and the general election fell on my son's birthday. Sometime the stars have to align and your numbers have to show you a magical sign.

This race was a lot different from a rural county race. I had to cover the state and spent lots of time in Seattle; I had to drive three hours from my home just to be anywhere! But I had great grassroots supporters who worked hard. That's the short version of how I became the 7th woman to serve on the Washington State Supreme Court.

Don't let the size of an undertaking deter you. Be ready when an opportunity presents itself.

The Heart of the Matter: On Deciding to Pursue the Judiciary



By Jane Faulkner, JD, CPCC, ACC

Do you remember the excitement in the air when Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsberg were appointed to the Supreme Court?

How do you decide if service on the bench is *your* path?

It's a decision that takes time and experience to make wisely, says Nancy Isserlis, a practicing lawyer in Spokane and a veteran judicial campaign manager for judiciary positions at all levels in our state system. Nancy has chaired or co-chaired at least two-dozen campaigns over the past 20 years (and worked on many more). She generously contributed her thoughts and wisdom to this column.

From my conversation with Nancy, three lenses emerged for evaluating your decision.

1. *First, what inspires you to consider the bench? Do you have a passion for public service?*

The judiciary's role in society is important and can be far-reaching. Take a look at the mission statement of the International Association of Women Judges: "The IAWJ believes that women judges are in a unique position to impact the rights of women through the judicial system, and to protect and empower women throughout the world. These judges operate on the premise that through the exercise of informed and united leadership, women judges can be catalysts for social transformation." www.iawj.org

If you feel passionate about being a judge, your passion will empower you to maintain a positive attitude about the more challenging aspects of the process—such as navigating screening committees, campaigning, and fundraising.

2. *Do your values align with the qualities that will support you in being a well-respected jurist?*

Nancy notes that being a good judge is less about brilliance and more about being well-rounded and having a broad base of legal and real world experience as well as a commitment to public service. That sort of experience contributes to the wisdom and judg-

ment found in the best judges. And once on the bench, judges are asked to be involved in their community and connect with people from all walks of life.

Other qualities often cited as important include detachment, impartiality, discernment, diligence, integrity, and comfort with public scrutiny and the possibility of making mistakes. Additionally, many women have been brought up developing their skills in empathy, understanding, listening, communicating, compassion and relationship building—all qualities that contribute to a balance of head and heart.

3. *Are you committed enough, in your desire to serve on the bench, to approach the selection and election processes wholeheartedly?*

Although approximately 70% of the judges in this state are appointed first, all judges in Washington have to stand for election after a fixed term of two to six years (depending on the court). If you are thinking about serving on the bench, you need to be prepared for the demands of running a campaign. There are stringent campaign, finance and ethical rules and responsibilities that are part of the process, not to mention the public scrutiny and high level of due diligence that are constant companions in the life of a judge.

Nancy suggests that anyone interested in the bench should work on a grassroots-level judicial campaign. The first-hand experience and insight gained is not readily available in any other way, and it may answer any questions still open after you have evaluated your decision through the lenses above.

As Sandra Day O'Connor said, "We don't accomplish anything in this world alone. ... and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one's life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that creates something."

Please join us in welcoming our new columnist, Jane Faulkner, a past practicing attorney and coach. She works with women attorneys to guide them to find fulfillment in their careers and lives, and can be reached at www.embodiedliving.com. Jane will be writing her quarterly column, titled, "The Heart of The Matter."



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