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# A Woman Who Believes

*Pokorny makes a career by believing in others as much as she believes in herself.*

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**The Honorable Sally Pokorny, BA '75 and JD '78**, has heard “no” before. Plenty of times, actually. *No, you can't be a county attorney. Nobody's going to hire a woman lawyer. You'll never become a judge.*

Throughout her career, she's been told her plans were impossible. She's gone ahead and done them all anyway.

No matter how many naysayers stood in her way, Pokorny believed in herself because there was no good reason *not* to. Not because she's from small-town Independence, Kansas (population: 9,483). Certainly not because she's a woman.

“In some ways, I think it's genetic. You're just born with a core that says, ‘I don't have to believe you; I can believe myself.’ I had good parents who never told me that there was something I *couldn't* do,” Pokorny, Douglas County District Court Judge, said.

“They always told me I was smart, and I could do whatever I wanted to do if I worked hard enough. So I believed them, and continued to believe them even when other people said they were wrong.”

## *Belief in herself*

Pokorny's confidence and tenacity have carried her through every phase of her 37-year career, even the daunting ones. They saw her through her post as Shawnee County assistant district attorney, her tenure as assistant and then county attorney in Montgomery County, and her 21 years of private practice in Independence — all at a time when “law firms were not real welcoming to women who wanted to be trial attorneys.” They sustained her in 2006, when she uprooted her life and moved to Lawrence, to be closer to her grown sons.

But even the strongest person sometimes needs a champion. In those moments, Pokorny turns to her steadfast supporters, Washburn Law alumnae **Linda Parks, BA '79 and JD '83**;





**Kathy Webb, '83; Laura Ice, '84; and Sally Shattuck, BA '76 and JD '79.** Besides sharing an alma mater, the five friends all had a hand in founding the Kansas Women Attorneys Association, which dates back to 1994.

These are the colleagues who pushed Pokorny to put her name in for district court judge in 2008. According to Parks — managing partner at Hite, Fanning & Honeyman L.L.P. in Wichita — that empowerment is exactly why they established KWAA. The group aims to fight discriminatory policies against women lawyers, fill more spots in statewide attorney groups, and boost the number of Kansas women known as “partner” and “judge.”

“I was the first president of the organization. She was one of the first board members. We all came together as like-minded people who wanted to help women in the law,” said Parks, who was the only woman lawyer at her firm for 11 years.

“She has probably the best judicial temperament of anyone I’ve observed. I admire her courage. But even with that, I think

Judge Pokorny would tell you it helped to have an organization like KWAA. People say, ‘Why does there have to be a women attorneys organization?’ It’s because we come together and say to people like Sally, ‘You can do it.’ That’s why those organizations are important.”

The group, by that measure, is an unqualified success. Pokorny was appointed judge by then-Governor Kathleen Sebelius in December 2008.

### *Belief in the next generation*

In the spirit of the organization, Pokorny relentlessly passes on the message her parents gave her: Women can be whatever they want to be.

That attitude might be more needed than ever. Even in these presumably progressive times, a quarter of the 31 Kansas district courts consist solely of male judges. Only three have a female majority. Pokorny’s district is one of them.

“I spend a lot of time telling people they can do whatever it is that they said they wanted to do,” said Pokorny, who regularly doles out advice and letters of recommendation to aspiring attorneys.

“I remember one woman from Independence who said, ‘I had talked to several people about just moving to New York City. And you were the only one who said, “Wow, that sounds like a great idea! That would be so much fun. You’ll be just fine.” Nobody else said that to me. So I decided to believe you.’ And that’s exactly what happened. She had a great time, and she was just fine.”

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Pokorny’s efforts haven’t gone unnoticed. In July 2015, KWAA awarded her the prestigious Jennie Mitchell Kellogg Achievement Award, named for the first woman admitted to practice law in Kansas. The honor declares that she’s a trailblazer, paving the way for women in law to follow.

“She’s willing to go the extra mile. She’ll go to the wall and kick it down,” Parks said. “Talk about somebody who leads by example. She’s the poster child for saying to young women, ‘You can do it.’ She did it the hard way, by going out on her own.”

## *Belief in her community*

After seven years on the bench and half her life as an attorney, Pokorny has found a common thread through every case — criminal and domestic. People just need someone to hear them out. No more, no less.

“I like the fact that at the end of the day, I really feel like I have helped people. Many people, they just want somebody to listen to their story, and I think I’m a good listener. My court reporter laughs and says, ‘Almost everybody you send to jail looks at you and says, “Thank you.”’ I think part of it is, nobody’s ever listened to them.”

Pokorny’s approach speaks to what she hopes to accomplish, as a judge and as a person.

“I am always willing to help. And the reason is because so many people in my life have helped me,” said Pokorny, singling out everyone from Professor Jim Concannon and **Professor Linda Elrod, BA ’69 and JD ’72**, to friend Patti McCormick, a marketing consultant who has voluntarily promoted Pokorny since 1995.

“I just have a hard time turning down anybody who would say, ‘I think you can help me.’ Because we’re all in this together in life.”

## *KWAA Jennie Mitchell Kellogg Award*

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Beginning in 1999, KWAA has presented the Jennie Mitchell Kellogg Achievement Award to a member

who has achieved professional excellence in her field. Of the 16 recipients, 10 of those women are Washburn Law alumnae.

### **Washburn Law Winners**

1999  
The Honorable Christel E. Marquardt, '74  
2000  
Linda Parks, BA '79, JD '83  
2001  
The Honorable Marla Luckert, BA '77, JD '80  
2004  
Lori Callahan, BBA '80, JD '83  
2008  
Nancy Ogle, '91

2009  
Laura Ice, '84  
2010  
Patricia Hamilton, BA '83, JD '87  
2013  
Sally Shattuck, BA '76, JD '79  
2014  
Cathy Reeder, AA '79, JD '82  
2015  
The Honorable Sally Pokorny, BA '75, JD '78