

Advocating for Equity and Inclusion at Washburn University's School of Law: Dean Carla Pratt

An introduction on behalf of the KBA:

I graduated from Washburn University School of Law in May of 2007. Washburn Law was both a professional and personal blessing. It is where I learned how to think like a lawyer and where I discovered my love for the courtroom. Washburn is known for its top notch and down-to-earth faculty who are truly invested in student success. I experienced this firsthand while attending Washburn Law. It also is the place where I met, proposed to and married my wife, Attorney Shanelle Dupree, over 15 years ago. I am deeply invested in Washburn Law's continued success.

I served as the president of the Student Body during my third year at Washburn. As the Student Body President, I was on the search committee in 2007. Ten years later, when I learned Washburn was searching for a new dean, I made certain to watch all the online interviews. Carla Pratt stood out. She was tactfully honest about Washburn Law's strengths and areas for improvements and offered new ideas. During her interview, she said, "Commitment to diversity is half the battle...having a person of color at the helm sends a message." Carla is not only the first woman of color to lead Washburn Law School, but she has a long history of excellent and impactful diversity and inclusion work. I rewatched Dean Pratt's interview to write this foreword, and she has overdelivered in this area and many others.

*Dean Pratt has integrated diversity, equity and inclusion into the fabric of Washburn by building upon the foundation that Washburn Law has laid for decades. The historic Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board Education*, had Washburn lawyers on both sides. *Brown v. Board* made equal access to public education possible, and it is arguably one of the most important cases in the 20th century. Dean Pratt, while rapidly securing funds for the new law school building, incorporated the idea of cementing the *Brown v. Board* legacy into the new building. Dean Pratt continues to highlight and tell the story of Washburn Law lawyers who advocated to end "separate but equal."*

Dean Pratt has mobilized faculty involvement by making diversity, equity and inclusion a consistent area of focus. This

bubbled to the surface when she issued a statement regarding the murder of George Floyd, which shook the collective conscious of the world. Her public statement paved the way, and faculty members of Washburn Law issued an Anti-Racist Resolution, which was adopted by the Washburn Law faculty on June 8, 2020.

Dean Pratt also is a national leader among deans regarding racial justice. Through the Association of American Law Schools, she is one of several deans who established the Law Deans Antiracist Clearinghouse Project. This project is responding to racism in the United States through the viewpoint of the law school leadership.

Dean Pratt is involved in making law school accessible to all students, including historically marginalized people, a phrase I refer to as the three B's: "black, brown and broke" folks. This is seen throughout her scholarly articles, advocacy and Midwest values. She now has a national platform by being appointed to the ABA Council which is recognized by the US Department of Education as the accrediting body for JD programs.

In summation, Dean Carla Pratt amplifies the courageous work Washburn Law has performed in its past and challenges Washburn Law to continue living up to its vision "of preparing outstanding lawyers and legally trained professionals to serve their local, national and global communities with excellence, integrity and professionalism; and through its scholarship and service strives to contribute to the development of the law and a more just society."



Be Blessed.

Mark A. Dupree, Sr., Wyandotte County District Attorney. Dupree is the 2021-22 Secretary/Treasurer of the KBA Board of Governors.

Washburn University's School of Law soon will celebrate a milestone – 120 years of graduating some of the finest lawyers in the country and beyond. A lot has changed in the decades since 1903. Yet, much has stayed the same, including the commitment to quality education.

“We’re really proud of that history,” said Carla Pratt, dean and professor of law at Washburn University. “We know we have to live the core values of Washburn.”

That means recruiting a more diverse student body and helping students find their voice.

“Washburn Law has never discriminated on the basis of identity,” Pratt said. “We have always educated all people.”

In 1910, the first African American graduated from Washburn Law, and the first woman graduate followed in 1912. But more than a century later, there is more to be done. Women, minorities and LGBTQ students continue to be underserved and underrepresented in law.

“When people ask me why we celebrate Black History Month, I explain that it’s because historically, the contributions of African Americans to our country were not taught in schools or recognized by society,” Pratt said. “It’s really important to teach Americans about the contributions of people from groups that have been marginalized in our society.”

Pratt believes the more people who are educated and trained to be lawyers from marginalized/disenfranchised communities, the better off society will be. Lawyers should learn early to always ask who benefits and who is burdened by law.

“Only by asking those questions are we going to make law more just,” she said.

While there still is work to be done, Pratt is optimistic. She is committed to promoting diversity in law school and the legal profession. She served on Penn State University’s President’s Commission for LGBTQ Equity, served as chair of a university committee charged with review and implementation of Penn State’s Diversity Strategic Plan, and is the recipient of several diversity and inclusion-related awards. She also has served on the Law School Admission Council’s Diversity Committee and as chair of the LSAC SOGI subcommittee.

Pratt has co-authored “The End of the Pipeline: A Journey of Recognition for African Americans Entering the Legal Profession.” More recently, she partnered with Professor



Photo courtesy of Moraganne Lander, Washburn University Social Media Specialist

Eboni Nelson on an article in the *Iowa Law Review*, titled “Assessing the Viability of Race-Neutral Alternatives in Law School Admissions.”

“I hope I live long enough to see that the legal profession has representation that is proportional to our society,” Pratt said.

A path paved by hard work

Nothing comes easy. That’s a lesson Pratt learned at an early age growing up on a farm in Platter, Oklahoma. It was there where she learned the value of hard work and an appreciation for community, modeled by her father, who would rise early each morning to tend to the farm, and her mother, who poured so much love and dedication into her children.

“When you see people who have that work ethic,” Pratt said, “it becomes a part of you.”

The farm also is where she learned neighbors look out for neighbors. When her father became sick and needed help, it was the neighbors who quickly jumped into action to keep the farm running.

“You have a duty to others,” Pratt said. She takes that to heart.

Pratt’s family moved to Sherman, Texas, for her junior year of high school. She knew she wanted to help people as she was graduating high school and heading off to college in the mid-80s. Due to her limited exposure, she believed her options were restricted: teach school, be a secretary, become a nurse or doctor, or be a lawyer.

“Law was attractive to me because I’m really someone who hates injustice,” Pratt said. She thought she would enter law school, practice civil rights law and “make the world a better

place.” Pratt enrolled at East Texas State University, now Texas A&M. After graduating, she attended Howard University School of Law in the nation’s capital, with scholarships making it possible for her to obtain both of her degrees.

Not only is Pratt a first-generation college graduate, but she also is a first-generation high school graduate. Her father, the grandson of a slave, was denied an education due to having to work as a child, and this emphasized the importance of education for Pratt. Her mother passed away when Pratt was only 12, and it was then that she discovered her father couldn’t read or write. That’s also when she realized what a privilege it is to be educated.

Education changed her life and made her realize education is a public good and not a private commodity.

“I know education has transformative power,” Pratt said. “It took me out of poverty. It’s still the ticket to the middle class today.”

A journey full circle

While her journey began in Oklahoma and Texas, she found herself heading east to Washington, D.C. and beyond. After graduating from law school, Pratt served as a deputy attorney general in New Jersey and then was in private practice in



Pratt in front of new Washburn University law building.

Philadelphia. By this time, Pratt was married and had two children. The guilt of her high-power, demanding job was starting to weigh on her as a mother – a feeling many women experience. Pratt said her family had two nannies helping, but she wanted to be the one raising her kids. She reflected on her childhood and on her own mother, and she realized something needed to change.

“The career will be there,” Pratt said.

She also was one of those types who loved law school and wasn’t feeling as fulfilled in her practice. She sought guidance from a trusted peer. His response during their conversation? “Oh, you’re an academic.”

Everything was pointing her back to law school – this time, as an educator. Pratt made the decision to go back to school to teach. She taught courses in constitutional law, federal Indian law, education law, and race and American law at Penn State University. She served as associate dean for diversity and inclusion at Penn State’s Dickinson School of Law.

This transition back into academia came with some sacrifices, but not that of her children. Pratt’s advice to working parents? “Seize those moments now. Spend that time now. You won’t regret it.”

But what she didn’t understand at the time was the other side of the coin. Her children, now young adults, have shared with her how much they respect the fact she was a working mother. In a way, Pratt’s childhood came full circle as she was able to model hard work and integrity for her kids, just as her parents did for her.

Pratt values a sense of community and looking out for others. She was an associate justice for the Supreme Court of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in Fort Yates, North Dakota, from 2012 to 2018. There she heard appeals and worked with the tribe in cases relating primarily to constitutional law, criminal law, family law and business law. She has served on non-profit boards providing services to low-income people, including the United Way of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and Mid-Penn Legal Services. She also is a member of the service sorority Delta Sigma Theta.

Pratt is happy to now be in Topeka and a part of the leadership team at Washburn University. It puts her within driving distance from where she grew up. She says folks from Oklahoma are “salt of the Earth” people. Kansans are, too.

Teaching law today and tomorrow

Washburn’s School of Law has moved a number of times during its nearly 120 years, and there has been a lot of growth since the current building was built in 1969. In the past 30

years, it has seen a 40% increase in the number of course offerings; a 20% increase in just the past 10 years.

In about one year, Washburn's law school will again move – this time into its new \$33 million building on the southeast corner of campus at 21st and Washburn. Its technology will pave the way into the future. The building should be finished and ready to welcome students starting in January 2023.



“I call this our smart building,” Pratt said. Plans for the new building and integrated technology already were in motion before the pandemic hit. School leaders knew the limitations of the current mid-century building, and they wanted to better reach students who have limited mobility or those living beyond the Topeka area. The pandemic only reinforced how technology was going to influence education in the future.

Pratt said the old model of legal education was to go to law school in the state where you want to practice, but the future of law school is going to law school where you will get a top education at an affordable price – wherever that is.

“Students in our Third Year Anywhere program can be anywhere on the globe if that’s where they want to practice law,” Pratt said. With graduates already on every continent outside of Antarctica, the technology in this new building will only expand the school’s footprint and encourage a more geographically diverse student body by allowing student participation without having to physically be on campus in Topeka.

Pratt wants all students – regardless of economic background – to have access to higher education. Thanks to the generosity of alumni, the school offers a number of scholarships to students. It is her goal to reach high school students earlier and show them they can get a solid education at an excellent value. If anyone understands the financial challenges of pursuing higher education, it is Pratt, who says academic scholarships made her education possible.



Architect renderings of new Washburn University law building. Above, exterior; Below, Dole Plaza.

“Everyone has capacity to learn and grow,” she said. Washburn, she added, does a fantastic job of attracting and graduating first-generation students, which benefits society because the more educated a population is, the more taxpayers it has contributing to the public coffers, which lowers the tax burden on each individual citizen. The more a citizenry is educated, the more a state and a nation flourishes. “It’s an exciting time in law schools,” Pratt said. ◆