



## Question & Answer

*New Washburn Law dean focuses her career on inclusion, civil rights.*

*By Jeremy Wangler | [jwangler@wualumni.org](mailto:jwangler@wualumni.org)*

Carla Pratt was drawn to Washburn by its civil rights history dating back to its founding in 1865. When she learned of Washburn's history as the law school that educated the lawyers who represented the Brown family and the State of Kansas in *Brown v. Board of Education*, she was drawn even more. Pratt became dean of Washburn University School of Law on July 1 after Thomas Romig stepped aside after 11 years in the position. She previously served as associate dean for diversity and inclusion and Nancy J. LaMont Faculty Scholar at Penn State's Dickinson School of Law. There, she received the law school's Philip J. McConaughay award for outstanding achievement in diversity related work.

From 2012 to 2018, Pratt also served as an associate justice for the Supreme Court of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in Fort Yates, North Dakota. In this capacity, she heard appeals involving tribal members and those doing business with tribal

members in cases relating primarily to tribal criminal law, family law, business law, and constitutional law.

Pratt is co-author of the book, "The End of the Pipeline: A Journey of Recognition for African Americans Entering the Legal Profession," which reports the findings of a qualitative study of African-American attorneys and challenges the assumption that blacks entering the profession today have a post-racial colorblind journey. In her most recent research project, Pratt co-authored an article in the *Iowa Law Review*, "Assessing the Viability of Race-Neutral Alternatives in Law School Admissions," which explores the potential for race neutral law school admissions.

Prior to joining the law faculty at Penn State Dickinson Law, Pratt engaged in private practice as a commercial litigator with the law firm of Drinker, Biddle & Reath LLP in Philadelphia and served as a deputy attorney general in New Jersey.



**What interested you about Washburn University School of Law?** I was really drawn to Washburn because of its history of inclusion. When I read that Ichabod Washburn made a financial contribution to save the institution, and I learned that he was an abolitionist who believed in the dignity of all people, and that all people deserved the opportunity to be educated, I was very impressed. That really resonated with me because that's who I am at my core. I thought, 'This place would be a good fit.' Also, I didn't know, despite teaching constitutional law for years, this was the law school that educated the Scott lawyers who filed the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. When I learned that history as well, it redoubled my enthusiasm about joining the institution.

**Talk about the importance of the *Brown v. Board decision* and its basis in Topeka.** Topeka was unique in that it was one of the few places in the country that really had provided equal facilities for children of color to attend public schools. And so that's why Topeka became such a good test case for the separate but equal principle that arose out of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. All black teaching staff were highly credentialed, so you're talking about very qualified teachers. So what could be the problem? It was really the ideal case because, the other cases consolidated in *Brown*, you could argue they just need to improve the teaching staff or the facilities to make it equal, and that's sufficient to meet the *Plessy* standard. But, the inclusion of Topeka really did center the Court's analysis on the inherent nature of inequality in segregation itself. That case is probably the most significant Supreme Court case of the 20th century. It certainly changed the trajectory of many people's lives, including mine. I wouldn't be sitting here, as a beneficiary of integrated public school education if that case hadn't been decided. For me, that case is fundamental in terms of America living up to its promise.

**What drew you to attending law school and later working in education?** I think my decision to go to law school happened my senior year in high school. I thought really hard about what I like to do. I knew I wanted to help people in some way. I wanted to feel like I was doing something to make the world a better place. At the same time, I enjoyed reading and writing, and so I said, 'Maybe I'll go to law school.' I went to college and majored in English because I learned you could study anything in undergrad and go to law school. English was my favorite subject in high school, and I thought I would hone my writing and reading skills. I applied to Howard Law School because of its civil rights history and thought I wanted to be part of that mission. Once I started practice, I went to the attorney general's office and I was supposed to be assigned to the civil rights division, but I got reassigned to the insurance section. So sometimes, your career takes a detour that you don't

intend. It was some time before I would get back to civil rights, and I started to think about education as a civil right and how education had been transformative for me and for so many people. I really do view myself as doing civil rights work as an educator. I really do see the intersection of the two. While I'm not going to court and litigating civil rights, I really do view myself as doing civil rights work as an educator. Serving in this capacity is the fulfillment of that initial ambition I had that motivated me to go to law school.

**What are your initial reactions and observations about Washburn?** I'm very happy that the people here at Washburn are just so warm, welcoming and down to earth. Everything I saw as an outsider, I'm now getting to see from the inside, which is very reaffirming. I'm really enjoying being here, learning more about the institution and getting to learn about programs across campus and how we might partner with them so we provide full opportunities to our law students here. Law students come with a huge variety of undergraduate



Top: Danielle Dempsey-Swopes, '92, Nicole Graves, and Dean Carla Pratt.  
Bottom: Annette Cavanaugh, B Ed '91, Steve Cavanaugh, BA '71, JD '80, and The Hon. Nancy Moritz, BBA '82, JD '85. Photos by Nick Krug.

backgrounds. One of the things I want to do is help students identify where their gaps in knowledge might be that they didn't get in undergrad because maybe they were narrowly focused on English literature, so they didn't take accounting. And to help those students, rather than hide from those gaps, to fill those gaps so they can be the best lawyer they can be.

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**What community connections do you see as possibilities with Washburn Law?** I'm looking forward to making some connections with people in the Topeka community and becoming part of both the legal community and the community at large. If there are non-profit boards that could use an extra pair of hands and eyes, I think our students would benefit greatly, and I think the non-profit community would benefit as well. I see a symbiotic relationship there.

**Diversity initiatives have been a big part of your career. Talk about that as a goal at Washburn Law.** Diversity is certainly on the agenda for addressing both at the law school and university level. I've been invited to

participate on a diversity council on the university level, and I'm really excited about the opportunity to work with people across campus on a diversity agenda that incorporates the law school and the broader university. I'm also excited about the opportunity to expand our diversity recruitment efforts and hopefully our yield in terms of students here at the law school.

**What is your message to alumni and friends?** My message is really a plea, and that is we really need your support in bringing the *Ideal Place* building campaign to a conclusion. My plea is for those who have already given to consider digging even deeper to bring this goal to fruition. For those who have not yet given, to make a gift. No gift is too small or insignificant. With all of us working together, we can get there. My pledge to you is that I will be working with our fundraising and development staff constantly to make sure we are putting a shovel in the ground as soon as possible. I'm really excited about this project and reinvigorating the energy around it and getting it done.

**And what excites you about the new Washburn Law building?** I'm very excited about some of the technological integration we can have in the curriculum that will allow us to deliver a 21st century education to students who don't have to be physically present in the building at all times to leverage that education. I also think it will help us recruit students. Competition for students is fierce. To continue to get the best and brightest students to come to Washburn Law, we are going to have to deliver a facility that speaks to students and demonstrates to students we're on the cutting edge and we're not lagging in the legal education arena.



Left: Dean Pratt, and The Hon. Mark Braun, '86. Right: The Hon. Rebecca Sanders, BA '75, JD '78, and Michael Lennen, '74. Photos by Nick Krug.