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Scott Graham

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## Legal Pad

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### Female Chiefs Have Words of Advice: "Your Honor"



[*Scott Graham*]

(Left to right, Barbara Madsen of Washington, Janice Holder of Tennessee, Leah Ward Sears of Georgia, Christine Durham of Utah and Dana Fabe of Alaska)

Barbara Madsen remembers when she first became a municipal court judge, how litigants would sometimes approach the bench, rest their elbows on it and say, "Barbara, let me just tell you what really happened."

Madsen didn't appreciate it. Male judges, she felt, were addressed as "Your Honor."

Twenty-two years later Madsen -- that's now Chief Justice Madsen of the Washington Supreme Court -- presumably finds lawyers more forthcoming with that form of address.

On Tuesday, she and four other women who've held the chief justice title came together to talk about the challenges they've faced on the way to the pinnacle of their state court systems. The panel was organized by Golden Gate University (the [Second Annual Chief Justice Ronald M. George Distinguished Lecture](#)) and informally kicked off [this week's annual conference](#) of the National Association of Women Judges.

Madsen said that early in her judicial career she had a realization:

"The way to build credibility was to build coalitions," she decided. Madsen looked especially to lawyers and judges who "didn't have a seat at the table" due to race or gender and worked with them on issues such as access to justice and diversity. That made sense, she added, because the people the courts typically serve are not "people at the top of their profession" but more often people who are out of work, forced out of their homes or victims of domestic violence. Other panelists talked about how much it had meant to them when a second female judge arrived at their courts. Justice Dana Fabe had been a member of the Alaska Supreme Court for 13 years before a female colleague -- Golden Gate alum Morgan Christen, who helped introduce the panel -- joined the court in 2008.

Fabe said she liked her male colleagues a lot, but that the court had been somewhat formal, communicating mostly through writing. Upon arriving at the court Justice Christen popped into Fabe's office and asked, "Want to get a latte?"

"I thought, 'Do I want to get a latte?' Yes!"

Justice Joan Dempsey Klein of California's Second District Court of Appeal, who moderated the panel, asked if -- in the wake of controversies about U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor's "wise Latina" remark and Ninth Circuit nominee Goodwin Liu's comments about affirmative action -- aspiring judges may become afraid to say or write anything about diversity.

The chiefs said they hope not. "We are not, in fact, a post-racial, post-gender society," said Christine Durham, chief justice of the Utah Supreme Court.

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