

# Tamara B. Packard: When Work Is Advocacy

**During Tamara Packard's 25 years' practicing law in Wisconsin, she has represented individuals and entities in employment-related or professional licensing matters and in civil rights and election law litigation, all with the goal of making the world a better place.**

BY SHANNON GREEN & JEFF M. BROWN

Tamara Packard returned to Madison in 1999 after graduating from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 1994.

Packard grew up in Michigan and moved to Ohio as a teenager. She attended Oberlin College tuition free because her mother worked for the college. "It was a good fit."

After law school, she worked in Saginaw for Legal Services of Eastern Michigan. In 1999, she moved back to Madison and soon was hired by Lester Pines as an associate with Pines Bach.

"I realized that it was not going to be good for my long-term future to be living in Saginaw as a lesbian," Packard said. "I decided Madison was just a better place for me."

In 2006, Packard became partner. "I'll retire here," she said.

Her choice for law was because "I wanted to make the world a better place."

Packard has done so for many people in Wisconsin.

## 'A Really Good Fight'

Packard chose to work in employment law when starting at Pines Bach because "that's what Lester Pines was looking for" when she was hired, Packard said.

"He taught me everything he knew about employment law, and I've just run with it. It's a great opportunity to work with people who have been wronged, and to seek justice, and to help people through a difficult time in their lives."

Packard's practice now includes civil litigation and appeals, as well as employee rights and civil rights and election law. It also includes licensing for physicians, nurses, and prospective attorneys.

The Pines Bach attorneys, she said, "have diverse practices, because we represent individuals, and we do a lot of democracy and political work."

On the day she was interviewed for this article, Packard was working to finish three briefs: one in a contested case with a state agency, one in a circuit court case, and one in an appellate court case.

"Most of the firm's clients are in some type of crisis, and I think we do a great job of helping [them] come out in the best possible circumstances," Packard said.



## WOMEN TO WATCH

## Jill E. Mueller: On Finding Your Niche and Establishing Your Credibility as an Expert

**Jill E. Mueller's interest in family law evolved to a niche expertise in child support. Now an attorney with the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, Mueller encourages her peers to be flexible and open to change. You never know when a topic will land in your lap, and you will be the person with specialized knowledge, she says. "If you stumble upon a topic, run with it."**

BY JOYCE HASTINGS

### What was your early vision for your career? How did it evolve since your admission to practice in 2013?

I went to law school planning to practice family law and child welfare. I thought I would be in a law firm setting my entire career. I chose classes and internships based on that plan and landed a job before graduation at a small firm in Wauwatosa. There, I primarily practiced family law - divorce, paternity, postjudgment cases as well as guardian ad litem appointments. I also ventured into GAL appointments in probate court and children's court.

During that time, I had an excellent mentor who gave me every opportunity to succeed. As I gained experience, I started to better understand which aspects of family law interested me. My main interest evolved to child support, and that led me to my job as an assistant corporation counsel in Rock County. In that position, I worked primarily with the child support agency.

### What led you to your current position with the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families in 2018?

My decision to leave Rock County was not an easy one. I enjoyed the work and the people. During my first maternity leave, I accepted an attorney position at the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF). I decided that working closer to home with a young child was a priority. This was pre-pandemic and before Zoom court appearances were an option.

I saw this position as a way to make a positive difference on the well-being of Wisconsin families on a larger scale. Currently, I support the Bureau of Child Support, the Bureau of Working Families, and the Bureau of Refugee Programs. I also assist DCF's contracts and procurement section.

While family law is still my primary interest, I no longer practice in the traditional firm setting, representing clients and attending hearings in various counties. Instead, I work with programs on policy and federal compliance that directly affect Wisconsin families.



Jill E. Mueller. Photo: Tatiana Shirasaki/Tati Photo

While I miss going to court, as a parent of three young children, not having a court calendar creates a better work-life balance.

### How did your experience in the State Bar's Leadership Academy influence your thinking about leadership?

I participated in the State Bar's G. Lane Ware Leadership Academy in 2021-22. What I remember most is who was not in the room. I assumed it would be those in managing partner or in traditional law firm leadership roles. You do not have to be in these roles to be a leader. You do not need to be a certain age or have a certain number of years' experience to be a leader.

Leadership skills are needed at every level. When you are working with a client, being authoritative and providing actionable advice is leadership. If there is a disagreement among colleagues, contributing to a resolution is leadership. Serving on a board in your community is also leadership.

### You have gained a reputation as an expert on child support. What advice do you have for other lawyers looking to build credibility as experts?

If you want to establish credibility in an area, do the work and put your name out there. I changed my entire career plan after I decided I was interested in child support. If you are genuinely interested in a topic, learn as much as you can and share that knowledge.

Look for ways to build your reputation beyond traditional networking (for example, attending formal events, hosting lunches with potential referral sources, or giving elevator pitches to anyone who will listen). As a reserved person, I would much rather put together a CLE seminar for State Bar of Wisconsin

PINNACLE® than go to a networking social hour. Join a board, write articles, or speak at conferences to reinforce your expertise.

Be open to taking on new areas of law. You never know when a topic will land in your lap, and you will be the person with specialized knowledge.

Before coming to DCF, I knew little about tribal family law and concurrent jurisdiction. DCF works closely with tribes in Wisconsin, and now I am someone who has specialized knowledge in this area. Because of this, I have presented several times on state and tribal jurisdiction in family law at state and national conferences.

My advice is, if you stumble upon a topic, run with it.

### What excites you the most about serving the needs of children and families involved in family court?

The federal child support program found in Title IV-D of the Social Security Act initially was put in place as a public assistance cost-recovery program. The program since has shifted to serving the whole family unit, including providing opportunities to help noncustodial parents succeed.

It is exciting to work with staff who are optimistic about the future and dedicated to making a positive impact.

### What career advice would you give new lawyers?

My advice to new lawyers, especially female lawyers, is stay flexible and open to change. If you do not feel valued at your workplace or if you do not like your supervisor's personality, look elsewhere. If you decide your current area of focus or workplace is no longer for you, try something else. No matter the number of years of experience, you have skills to offer. **WL**

**Joyce Hastings** and **Mary E. Burke** are coordinating this series of woman history makers and women to watch in celebration of the 150th anniversary of women in the law in 2024.

Over the past 25 years, she has argued cases in trial and appellate courts and several times before the Wisconsin Supreme Court.

"I have many victories and many losses, and some of the losses we put up a really good fight – it just turned out that we didn't win the case but we still did really good justice for our clients," Packard said.

A personally important victory was her work on *Appling v. Doyle*,<sup>1</sup> which challenged the constitutionality of Wisconsin's 2009 domestic partnership law. "We got a unanimous decision from the Wisconsin Supreme Court upholding the domestic partnership [law]," Packard said.

And there's her work on *Madison Teachers Inc. v. Walker*.<sup>2</sup> "We lost, but in the meantime, we were able to keep full collective bargaining rights for the Madison teachers for several years longer than anybody else."

Packard has recently worked on public-records and redistricting cases. "We represented the governor and the challenge to the lame-duck legislation, and that was really fun to be part of. I represented the eight Senate democrats in the last round of redistricting litigation," she said.

### Mentors: 'Hugely Influential' Colleagues

At Pines Bach, seven of the firm's nine partners are women. "We are primarily women working in our workplace," she said.

The people who have had the greatest influence on Packard are her coworkers. "Right now, all of the women I work with are hugely influential," Packard said. "Our culture is supportive of people's personal and professional development," Packard said. "That's been true my entire time here, but I think it's notable, given the women that I work with now."

### Advice to Women Who Are New Lawyers

Packard has some advice for new

lawyers. "Look for good mentors – and they don't have to be women," Packard said. "Lester Pines has been a fantastic mentor, probably the best I've ever had."

Packard also advises new lawyers to not be afraid to ask questions, especially those they think are "stupid." "[Y]ou have to be curious and you have to explore things to solve the problem that's right in front of you, and in the process, you might learn something that will help you solve the next problem."

One more thing: "Take care of yourself," Packard said. "Do things that you enjoy and that clear your mind at the end of the day – things that are not law."

### Ongoing Struggles in Law Practice

"I think the world is a more anxious place, a more angry place, a more divided place, a place where we don't interact with people who are different from ourselves on a regular basis," Packard said. "There are very few people in the middle and there are a lot more people who are haves and a lot more people who are have-nots. Everybody's angry."

Everyone practicing law has the same challenges, regardless of gender, according to Packard. "The challenges are to see people honestly and not layer on stereotypes and preconceptions," Packard said.

Women "get misunderstood because someone says, 'That's a woman,' or we get misunderstood because someone says, 'That's an African American person.'"



GREEN



BROWN

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**MAKING HISTORY:**

# Old World Wisconsin Reenactment of Admission of Wisconsin's First Woman Lawyer, Aug. 8

Old World Foundation joins the legal community in celebrating 150 years of women in the law and the significant contributions women have made to Wisconsin's legal history.

To commemorate the 150th anniversary of Lavinia Goodell becoming Wisconsin's first woman lawyer, Old World Foundation will host a reenactment of Lavinia Goodell's admission to practice law in Wisconsin on Aug. 8.

The drama of Lavinia Goodell's battle to open the practice of law to women paved the way to a more diverse and inclusive profession in Wisconsin and throughout the United States, opening doors to greater access to justice for underserved individuals and groups.

This program will take place at Old World Wisconsin in Eagle at 11 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. during its "Kids Get in Free" week.

"Old World Wisconsin is Wisconsin's premier living history attraction that shares the stories of the past through hands-on activities," says Gwen Griffin, executive director of Old World Foundation. "Thus, this reenactment is the perfect program to bring to the site."

To purchase tickets for the Aug. 8 event, visit [oldworldwisconsin.org](http://oldworldwisconsin.org).

### Celebrating Women in the Law

"Atty. Goodell's June 17, 1874, admission to practice in Rock County is a reminder of the significant contributions women have made to Wisconsin's legal history and their efforts to overcome challenges to full participation within the profession," says Mary E. Burke. Burke and a consortium of women lawyers, including representatives of the Association

for Women Lawyers, the Legal Association for Women, and the recently formed Women Lawyers of the North, are planning a variety of activities in 2024.

"Through the telling of stories of women in the law - past and present - we want to ensure that women are written into Wisconsin's legal history," says Tracey Schwalbe, president of the Legal Association for Women. "Just as important, we hope these stories encourage others to support women's full integration into the profession and inspire others to bring their unique life experiences and backgrounds to the practice of law."

"For the newest generation of lawyers, we hope to create awareness of the path Goodell and other women have paved for them," continues Schwalbe.

This consortium invites the legal community to celebrate the women within their own law firms, offices, or law-related organizations. Share your own histories and stories of the women in your offices and within your local bar associations and community with the public, clients, and local media.

### To Learn More

To learn more about the celebration of 150 years of women in the law, contact Mary E. Burke at [WisWomenLaw150@gmail.com](mailto:WisWomenLaw150@gmail.com).

To learn more about Lavinia Goodell, visit [laviniagoodell.com](http://laviniagoodell.com). **WL**



"We have to take people as they are as people," said Packard.

Loss of civility in the practice of law "ties in with stereotypes. We all just need to be nicer to each other," Packard said.

### 'When There Are Nine'

"I would love to see women running the world," Packard said. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg said that there will be

enough women on the U.S. Supreme Court "when there are nine," Packard noted. "I want to see more women-led law firms that will also benefit from the contribution of male lawyers."

"The best lawyers should be at the top, and in my experience that's what's happened at my firm." **WL**

### Hear more from Tamara Packard

In a 2017 oral history interview at Minds @ UW, Packard discussed her career and her activism for LGBTQ rights and marriage equality in Wisconsin.

Check it out at <https://minds.wisconsin.edu/handle/1793/84046?show=full>.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>2013 WI App 3, 345 Wis. 2d 762, 826 N.W.2d 666, *aff'd sub nom. Appling v. Walker*, 2014 WI 96, 358 Wis. 2d 132, 853 N.W.2d 888.

<sup>2</sup>2014 WI 99, 358 Wis. 2d 1, 839 N.W.2d 388. **WL**