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September 19, 2017

Newsroom

Governor Raimondo on RWU Law

Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo recently sat down with Dean Michael Yelnosky to talk about law, legal education, and the increasingly vital role of RWU Law

On September 19, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed a package of criminal justice reform bills. Governor Raimondo has said she will sign them into law. Earlier this year, RWU Law Dean Michael Yelnosky had the opportunity to sit down with the Governor to talk about that legislation, and the role RWU Law played in helping to educate the community about the issues. They also chatted more broadly about the role of RWU Law, about the way in which the Governor's legal training impacts the way she thinks about and does her job, and about her underrated sense of humor.

Governor Gina M. Raimondo became Rhode Island's first female governor in January 2015. The Rhode Island native and Rhodes Scholar graduated from Harvard College and Yale Law School before serving as a law clerk to U.S. District Judge Kimba Wood in Manhattan. She co-founded a venture capital firm in Rhode Island and served four years as state treasurer before becoming governor.



Dean Yelnosky: *So how do you think your legal training impacts your political work – when you were treasurer and now in this position?*

Governor Raimondo: You know, I am thankful for it every single day. Some of it is just knowledge – it's helpful to know the law if you are the governor; to not be afraid to dig into it. I like it: reading cases or reading the law. For example, before you came in here I was interviewing a judicial candidate. It's helpful to have a law background when you are putting people on the bench.

Second, just knowing how to think like a lawyer is helpful. Knowing how to dissect problems helps me every single day in my job.

Another thing is, I believe very strongly in social justice, fair criminal justice, equality. I think some of that is who I am, my upbringing. But a lot of it is also from having studied the law. So I think having a knowledge of how we gained civil rights, how the political and legal process came together to bring about racial equality, gender equality, LGBT equality *under the law*, all of this strengthens my resolve and hopefully my ability to bring about positive changes.

When I was in law school, I did a lot of the clinics – and Yale is really good for that because Connecticut allows law students to practice. So I did the housing clinic, the poverty clinic. The thing that we did that I was most proud of was, we actually threatened to sue – and we may have actually brought suit against – the Yale University Police Department. Because at the time when I was in law school, the Yale Police Department would basically go after these African-American women who were selling flowers – or, in [the police] view, aggressively begging.

MY: *On the campus?*

GR: Well, around the campus. Every night the police would go around and [arrest] these women. They would then call the New Haven police, and these women would spend the night in jail. And as part of the clinic we said, 'Why are they going to jail?' It seemed to us they were going to jail because they were black women exercising their free speech.

So anyway, we threatened to sue the Yale Police Department. We wound up settling. But for me, it was a great lesson in civil rights. And it's an experience I still remember – Linda was our client's name. She had no voice; she allowed herself to be locked up every night because she was afraid basically to speak up. And we felt that it was just a clear violation of her basic civil rights. So things like that affect me still, and I think make me a better governor – [they are experiences] I wouldn't have had if I went to, say, business school.



MY: Yes, you were helping real people with real problems, which is what our clinics do. These are people who don't get representation otherwise.

GR: Right! For example, we did a lot of landlord/tenant disputes. It made it real. People getting kicked out of their homes – people who have no voice, no representation, couldn't afford a lawyer, had kids. It was a powerful thing for a privileged kid at Yale Law to have to walk into someone's low-rent apartment in New Haven and see how they were living, and then to feel the power in using the law to make their life better.

I loved that kind of law – really being an advocate for people who needed it. But I came out of law school with \$70,000 or \$80,000 in debt, so I needed to make money. Maybe I'll return to that kind of work in another life, when I am done – because it's pretty awesome to be an advocate for someone.

MY: I'd like to think that the law school has also had some impact in sort of teeing up criminal justice reform. [RWU Law Distinguished Jurist in Residence Judge Judith Colenback Savage, a retired Rhode Island Superior Court judge] had a huge symposium on that topic.

GR: It definitely has. Because if [this type of reform is just coming] from the governor, then it's somehow [perceived as] my liberal agenda on criminal justice. But having the law school, with [expert and knowledgeable] people around it, saying: "Hold on a minute, this will actually save money, this is actually best practices in criminal justice probation and parole" – that helps a ton.

It's a package of six or seven bills designed to bring our probation and parole practices into alignment with that of other states. Rhode Island is unusual in that we keep people on probation and parole for many, many years, which is expensive and makes it really hard for them to get a job, and hard to reintegrate themselves [into their communities]. Also, we put people back in jail pretty easily for minor technical violations – which, again, is expensive and makes it very hard for people to reintegrate. So we are an outlier in these practices, and we are just trying to modernize our approach to be more in line with the rest of the country, which I think is fair.



MY: Overall, what kind of a resource do you think the law school has been for you and for the state in general? You grew up here when there wasn't a law school.

GR: It's a great resource. I meet people almost every day who are graduates of the law school, who are contributing to Rhode Island in an important way. They are public interest lawyers, or maybe they run a small business, or work in a private practice. I think that is really the way you have the biggest impact over time – [by producing] thousands of people who are very well educated and who are *local*, practicing here and making the bar better.

[A good example of this dynamic involves the issue of] licenses for undocumented immigrants – that is a perfect case where I think the reason people actually oppose it is they are not fully informed. They think giving someone a driver's license will somehow confer citizenship or help them get citizenship sooner. There is confusion about it. That's where [the legal and policy analysis put forth by RWU Law's Immigration Law Clinic and the Latino Policy Institute at RWU] comes into play. What you guys have done is say: This is about public safety; a dozen plus states have already done it; and it has to be done statutorily, not by executive order, if it is going to last.

You also did a great job just talking about the economic benefits: allowing people to get to work *helps* the economy. Once again, the point is that if I am the only one stumping for it, then it's [perceived as] political – like it's part of the governor's agenda. So having a neutral third-party, a highly respected entity such as RWU Law, that just educates people on complex issues, is massively valuable.

MY: *Tell me about your philosophy on picking judges.*

GR: I look for high-quality, high-integrity, hardworking [candidates]. People who I think will give everyone who comes before them a fair shake. That is important. You know, chances are, if you are in court before a judge, you are not having a good day. You're losing your kids; you're getting a divorce; you did something wrong; you might be poor; you might not be white. So I really want people [on the bench] who are able to keep their biases in check and treat everybody fairly.

MY: *And finally, I think your sense of humor is underrated. [When you were on NPR's "Wait, Wait...Don't Tell Me,"](#) you were really funny.*

GR: You are nice to say that. I like to try to be funny. I tell a lot of jokes around here. Everyone is so serious, and I am always trying to leaven it with some humor.

MY: I'm going to start to change the narrative a little bit. All I hear is "all work and no play."

GR: That's very gendered, though. People don't understand: "Well, hold on a minute, are you a warm and fuzzy mom? Or are you the governor?" Here's the thing: You can be both. You have to be different things at different

times. If I'm making a difficult decision, I am going to be serious. If I'm with school kids or with my family, I'm going to be light and funny.

[This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.]