



Bridging Generations in Legal Services: A Diverse Conversation on Change, History, and the Link to Today

Columbia Legal Services (CLS) Director Aurora Martin gathered with Advocacy Director John Midgley and Attorney Katara Jordan to discuss mentoring and working across three generations of legal services attorneys.¹



Katara Jordan, Aurora Martin, and John Midgely.

Question: In your opinion, what are the different generations within legal services today? Which do you identify with and what are differences have you observed among the generations?

John Midgley, Advocacy Director, Columbia Legal Services:

I'm a Baby Boomer. My generation was not quite the first to work in modern legal services, but we were one of the first (started in mid-1970s), so I am definitely an early-generation legal services person.

I don't typically think in terms of discrete generations, but I think one could say there are approximately three generations in legal services—my generation, a generation that has around twelve to twenty years of experience, and the new generation.

I think this has to do with funding over time. Legal services experienced funding cuts in the early 1980s, so there weren't many people who came in then. There was a lost generation there. The next generation consists of people who joined in about the 90s. As

funding fluctuates, so do the number of people who join legal services.

Katara Jordan, Attorney, Columbia Legal Services:

I think I fall into the Millennial category. I agree with John. I think there are three or four generations in legal services.

I am uncomfortable with generalizations about generational differences, because you can find similarities among all generations. I did some informal polls with some of the other attorneys at Columbia Legal Services to get their feedback as well. There's this notion that Millennials are an entitled generation and that we appreciate feedback and acknowledgement—but I think all generations appreciate feedback. Millennials are known to be more technological savvy, so we have different ways of accessing and processing information. For example, someone from another generation may be accustomed to reading a case from beginning to end, whereas a Millennial might just use "control find" to search for keywords—not always the best choice.

In my view, Millennials are also very open to collaboration. However, this may be limited to my perspective as a legal services attorney, because I certainly haven't experienced other generations not wanting or willing to collaborate! I think CLS handles skill-sharing among generations very well.

Aurora Martin, Director, Columbia Legal Services:

I am in Generation X, and I definitely feel like I am between the two generations. I think my generation shares some of the characteristics of both the Baby Boomer and Millennial generations, so I can relate to both. I think my generation is in a position to balance and bridge by building on the pioneering work that John's generation initiated during the War on Poverty in the 1960s. At the same time, I think Generation X had was "coming of age" so to speak, with the advent of

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Continued from page 39

technological innovation, which is now the context for the Millennials.

Question: How do you think your generation views the history of legal aid, its differences from modern legal aid, and their role in it?

Midgley: As far as current legal aid goes, I think it is good that we are doing a broader variety of work and collaborating with other attorneys and organizations.

As far as the history goes, that's an interesting segue to something I was thinking about when Katara was talking about Millennials and feedback. When I started working in legal services, we were all so new that there really weren't many people who were much more experienced than I was. We often had to figure things out for ourselves because there was no other choice. Now I have almost forty years of experience and people come to me for advice. It is very different. I can give advice and perspective, and be the resource that we didn't have. And this can be both positive and negative—it can encourage collaboration but it also runs the risk of preventing people from figuring things out on their own. Sometimes when I talk about my experience with the early years of legal services, though, people tell me that I am just being nostalgic. I don't think I am. I think there is more than that.

Martin: Regarding John's comment about nostalgia, I do think reflections on the past can sometimes come across as nostalgic and so there may be a tendency to dismiss "what used to be" by others who were not part of that generation. But I think that's the very challenge for legal services today: how do you bridge the different generational cultures and the desire to have some level of continuity and coherence to the work of equal justice for all. As a matter of identity, I think it is crucial that legal services understand and draw strength from a common legacy that sometimes is taken for granted or forgotten. Because the work is often overwhelming and the issues of poverty and injustice persistent and insidious, we end up relying on our independent experiences to filter or cloud the big picture. One of the challenges comes when we try to make sure that we are building upon the historical context but then also making room for new ideas and change. At a leadership level across the country right now, I think we are puzzling over how to inspire the next generation—how to recruit and retain the "soldiers" of the continued War on Poverty. I

think one of the problems is that perhaps each generation's differences are expressing our shared values so differently that it feels like there is a disconnect, when maybe what we need is a revisitation of our shared values.

Jordan: I don't have a negative reaction when people talk about the history of legal aid. I don't think it is "just" nostalgic. It is informative. On the one hand, I know we do good work and should be respected for it, but there is also this history in legal aid of devaluation by others. If anything I hear history as a warning. It is an opportunity to be aware of how the legal services field has been viewed historically and how views can change due to politics and other social shifts. It is important for us to know that context—it's like the puzzle piece that brings all the other pieces together.

Midgley: I think one of the things you said is really crucial, Aurora. You said that sharing our history is about the values and not how we did the work or what was the work we did. I think those values include connecting with the communities and listening to clients. I'm not saying we should do it the way we used to, I'm saying that these values have a timeless quality to them, that they resonate and have some meaning. They also need to be applied to current conditions.

Question: Can you say a bit more about changes in experiences, diversity, and perspectives across the generations in legal services?

Midgley: My generation in legal services, the Baby Boomer generation, was overwhelmingly white. The new generation coming into legal services is much more diverse, especially ethnically. And I think that has profound implications for legal services because it influences the different experiences and points of view that come in. I don't think it means people are more sincere or more committed in one generation or another, I just think it is different. And different in a very good way.

Martin: And with that comes a much different perspective, right? Just even in the practice. Setting aside the political issues, the anti-poverty strategies, the poverty issues persist but they are presented very differently. The way in which we are approaching it as programs, leaders, and advocates has changed. It's not necessarily good or bad in terms of value characterizations, but it is different.

If we were to ask, "Now that the judiciary has changed to become more diverse, does it make a difference?" I think that most people would say, "Yes, it does

make a difference, all the way to Supreme Court.” It makes difference for me as a Generation X woman of color, and daughter of immigrant parents, to articulate what it means to experience barriers, opportunity, and justice in the United States. Whether it is gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, or sexual orientation, or all of the above, I think most of us would agree that the experience you come from makes a difference in how one might articulate and interpret laws, and how justice may be advanced or repressed. So, I think it is timely for legal services to take a pause and think about this cultural context which is so much deeper.

I think the public narrative is shifting and the strategies are shifting. We were fighting to bring our clients and their needs into the “circle of human concern,” as John A. Powell puts it. The challenge now is to deal with things that are not obvious but more at the level of implicit bias. Our work these days is often about joining forces with other organizations that, together with legal services, have an amplified and collective impact.

If we look back forty to fifty years, our generations represent very different political, economic, and technological contexts (and opportunities) that influence the frame of our antipoverty work.

Jordan: I think Millennials and, to some extent, Gen-X grew up in a different political and social environment. It seems that the social movements that started legal services came to a peak or climax during the 60s and 70s. So I think that my generation still has a passion for the work, but I don’t know if it is a collective passion.

Also, thinking about diversity, it is true that there wasn’t a lot of ethnic, racial diversity in legal aid lawyers in the Baby Boomer generation. However, as an African American female, I still don’t feel like there’s a lot of ethnic and racial diversity in legal services. There is more, especially in context of the different generations, but I don’t feel like the legal services community in Seattle attracts many people of color. When I was going to law school, there weren’t many students of color, particularly black students, who were interested in going into legal services. I saw some who were interested in going into other public interest fields, but not legal aid.

Question: What have been your experiences as a mentor and mentee to people of other generations?

Martin: I am in an interesting, awkward place of privilege. John and others in his generation, such as Ada

Workplace Generations

Definition of a “Generation”: A generation is defined by the common attitudes, experiences and preferences that develop in the context of social and economic events of a defined period of time.

Greatest Generation/Silent Generation — born 1901–1945

- A time when loyalty was all important
- Long services to an organization were rewarded with raises and promotions
- Respectful of company hierarchy
- Resistant to “new ways” of doing things
- Expect infrequent feedback

Baby Boomers — born 1946–1962

- Workaholics – “work til you drop”
- Experienced fierce competition entering the field
- Invented the “60 hour work week”
- Expect annual performance review

Generation Xers — born 1963–1980

- Put a premium on balancing work and life
- Demand open communications on all levels
- Loyal to people rather than organizations
- Technologically savvy – telephone and email
- Expect “timely” feedback

Millennials — born 1981–2002

- Value individual relationships
- Lifelong access to technology
- Value feedback – expect instant feedback
- Value recognition
- Seeking personal fulfillment from their work
- Email and text messaging, multitasking

Three Steps to Address Generational Issues:

- Be familiar with generational characteristics and motivators
- Be aware of personal style differences
- Use effective communication and collaborative techniques

Based on Brinckerhoff, Peter C., *Generations: The Challenge of a Lifetime for Your Nonprofit*, (Fieldstone Alliance, 2007).

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Continued from page 41

Shen-Jaffe, Michele Storms (she's not a Baby Boomer but was a great mentor), Jim Bamberger, Greg Dallaire, Steve Fredrickson, Robin Zukoski have really taken the time to mentor me, so I now feel an obligation to replicate that. But it isn't so easy! I have worked closely with John for more than a decade, and others have been part of this ten year apprenticeship. I don't know if that is a common experience. I am overwhelmed with how to "pay it forward."

Columbia Legal Services has developed into a very different organization than when I first started; we are one-third the size of what we used to be in 1999 when I started as a fellow; focused on larger-scale advocacy, and thinking about impact in different ways as well. Now that I am the program's director, I am trying to figure out how to make space and set aside resources so that I can have a smooth transition for the next director. I feel self-conscious about it and even as I finish up my third year, I feel a sense of urgency to begin developing leaders now. I am still exploring that question, because I think we need to focus on developing a culture of leadership and a sense of continuity over the generations. It needs to be part of the big picture strategy, and I imagine it is not one that Columbia Legal Services is grappling with in isolation, but one that other programs around the country and national leadership must figure out as well.

Midgley: Mentoring is challenging because it is hard to know what people need. With some people, you can say a few words and they go figure it out, and with others you need to work more closely, so I think you have to be intentional about it. For example, when I am looking at someone's writing, I try not to make it into what I would write. Instead, I try to give big picture feedback and not say exactly how to write. I try to help them do what they are already doing, but better. And sometimes I have to step back and say to myself, "I wouldn't have written it that way, but I think it is fine." It is important for people to get to the point where they can make their stuff good on their own.

But I think mentorship can also be challenging because, as a mentor, my suggestions carry a lot of weight. People defer, so what were meant as suggestions are often taken as necessary changes. I try to say which comments I feel strongly about and which are merely suggestions. Over time, I like to see people develop their own judgment and set out to do it their own way. But I do feel that mentorship is very important. That's why

I've moved around a lot in and out of different positions and doing different things, because I think that people need to be in different positions in order to build diversity.

Jordan: I love being able to share my experience with others when I can. I've always taken the perspective that mentorship is a heart-to-heart relationship, so I've always valued the art of mentoring. My attitude is that I've always learned a lot from the people around me and I want to learn everything I can. Teach me everything. Tell me everything. I'm ready and happy to drink from the fire hose!

On a more serious note, I've been grateful to have that opportunity here at CLS, and I want to pay that forward to others. If I ever got to a position of supervising or leadership, my door would always be open. Actually, at CLS, I've had an opportunity to supervise interns and others. What I value about those working relationships is that they're less hierarchical and more egalitarian. All the interns I've worked with have always been my thought partners. I am energized by that model of being able to bring someone in and say, "Hey, let's do this. Your input is just as valuable as mine." It builds confidence. As a mentee, I've been brought into situations in which I thought it was frankly impossible for me to accomplish what was needed, but my mentors valued and encouraged my input, and in those instances I exceeded my own expectations. Throughout my career, I've been able to develop my own team of mentors who have been invaluable to me. Thus, I have a responsibility to pay their kindness forward

Question: What are the collective strengths and weaknesses that each generation brings, and how can those strengths and weaknesses be used to further legal services?

Jordan: To sum up the points that I think I've heard woven through the conversation, I think John's generation is very much about taking the initiative, giving something a try, and figuring it out. My generation is interested in getting feedback and figuring out as much as they can before making their next move, and Aurora's generation helps bridge the two. Each brings their own strengths and skills to the conversation.

Martin: From a programmatic standpoint, there is a continuity and cohesiveness issue. I have struggled with the question of whether we are hiring for life or just hiring people. I don't think this has to be a lifetime commitment, like tenure, and I think loosening up that way of doing things can result in losing sight of

values between generations because of the differences in the ways we are trying to get there. That might just be one example of the fact that different generations have different ways of pursuing the same goals. Also, since the issues present themselves differently today than they did then, twenty or thirty years ago, the paths to solutions are sometimes harder, sometimes quicker. We might have litigated something before, and now we do more legislative work. But I think sometimes the various methods that each generation uses to achieve a goal—whether a program goal or culture goal—those can be different. Sometimes that remembering a shared vision of justice, shared values. I think it is about constantly going back to those values. It is important to remember the shared vision of justice and reason for our work and that we aspire to build an inclusive and equitable community.

Midgley: I thought about this a little before this conversation. I don't see huge differences between the generations in terms of many things, but people in my generation sometimes hint that they think Millennials are more focused on their personal lives and families. Yet I don't see that as a generational thing; I think there are many people in Katara's generation that approach the work the same way my generation did. They do the work, often giving long hours, and they care deeply about it and they still have families, friends, and a life. Some of those things that people bring up are overgeneralizations.

I do think the strength of the generations that came after mine are really what people have said: they have different ways of looking at things. I have often worked with good less experienced attorneys who came up with something that the rest of us had never thought of. More experienced people said "that will never work" until someone did it and it did work. That's what we always have to encourage, and I don't see that as missing from the generations after me.

- 1 Katara Jordan is a staff attorney in the Children and Youth Project at Columbia Legal Services (CLS). At CLS she engages in multi-disciplinary advocacy through partnerships with local universities, the Gates foundation, and local and national groups dedicated to ending child and family homelessness. Katara's work focuses on removing barriers to academic success for homeless students. She is a former Equal Justice Works Fellow. Katara may be reached at katara.jordan@columbialegal.org.

Aurora Martin is the Executive Director of Columbia Legal Services. Aurora began working at Columbia Legal Services during law school at the University of Washington and continued as an Equal Justice Works Fellow before joining the leadership team. She works to integrate and expand leadership development efforts and access to justice issues. Through collaboration with community partners, she has helped create multiple new leadership development opportunities. Aurora may be reached at aurora.martin@columbialegal.org.

John Midgley brings nearly forty years of experience as a lawyer and administrator to his work as Advocacy Director at Columbia Legal Services. For the first 20 years of his work, John focused mostly on conditions of confinement and issues of fair sentencing for residents of jails, prisons, and other institutions. He has also worked on cases for senior citizens, people with disabilities, foster children, and others. John may be reached at john.midgley@columbialegal.org.

Columbia Legal Services advocates for people who face injustice and poverty. CLS seeks to achieve social and economic justice for all, using policy reform, litigation, and innovative partnerships to reveal and end actions that harm the communities they serve.

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