

WORKING: CONVERSATIONS WITH ESSENTIAL WORKERS BEHIND THE SCENES IN THE COURT SYSTEM

Written by Suzanne L. Schmidt



At the end of the workday, like the rest of us, Senior U.S. Circuit Judge J. Clifford Wallace at the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals heads home. When he walks back into his chambers the next morning in his suit, tie, and cufflinks, everything has magically reset. His preferred lamps and lights are on, and the rest of the lights are off. Three sharp pencils are lined up on his desk precisely in the same spot they have reliably appeared every morning over the past several decades. Also, on his polished wood desk is a document outlining his schedule, his mail laid out in a specific order, and a neatly stacked pile of e-mail printouts that require his review for the day.

If you were a courthouse ghost that enjoyed sleeping in Judge Wallace's chambers at night, you would be woken up each morning by none other than Karleen Jones Fowlkes, Judge Wallace's judicial assistant, gracefully resetting the space.

As Karleen has dutifully assisted Judge Wallace for a cumulative total of 21 years, we felt compelled to interview Karleen for the fifth of an occasional series inspired by Studs Terkel's 1972 masterpiece *Working*. In this series

of interviews, we discuss the lives of essential workers (excluding lawyers and judges) and the work they do behind the scenes in the court system.

On the day of the interview, April 20, 2025, Karleen arrived early to my office. She sat patiently in the reception area. The receptionist notified me of her arrival, and I quickly gathered my notes and walked over to greet her. When she stood up, I observed an elegantly dressed, tall, confident woman with a very warm, kind presence. We sat down to talk and immediately connected.

EARLY EXPOSURE TO LAW

As a child, Karleen helped her father establish his legal practice in the areas of personal injury, contracts, and probate and tax law. Her father was a frugal man with high standards. She recalls slowly and anxiously typing out wills on expensive parchment paper using a typewriter. A minor typographical error necessitated discarding the paper and starting over from scratch.

One day, her father noted, "Karleen, this is the last four sheets of paper, so you cannot make any mistakes." On the third sheet of paper, she made a mistake. She immediately burst into tears, walked over to her father and confessed. He said, "No problem. We'll buy some more paper." She later transformed her fear of making mistakes into an appreciation for precision and extending grace to herself and others when errors occur.

In college, Karleen explored different majors. Initially, she studied science, transitioned to a mathematics major, and eventually decided to pursue a more expedient route, graduating with a degree in Human Development. After graduating, she found herself back in school, pursuing a graduate degree in Marriage and Family Counseling.

During graduate school, Karleen married. She attended school full-time and worked full-time to provide for her husband and children. Her then-husband preferred not to work. He claimed to want to become an attorney, so she encouraged him to take the LSAT. Her father, uncles, and grandfather were all attorneys. Karleen eventually persuaded him to take the exam by offering to take it with him. He performed poorly, but she scored high, which made her consider becoming an attorney herself.

At the age of 26, Karleen enrolled in Southwestern Law School—working in the daytime at a law firm and going to law school at night. After completing her first year, she realized she enjoyed the legal profession, but she did not want to be an attorney. She pivoted, and with renewed clarity, committed solely to a secretary position at a respected law firm.

CAREER AND ENTRY INTO THE COURT SYSTEM

As a legal secretary, she frequently assumed responsibilities far beyond her job title. Often, she worked on substantive legal tasks, such as drafting and editing, which were typically the responsibilities of paralegals. Despite her initiative and excellent performance, there was no upward mobility without additional certification. She had no interest in being a paralegal. The attorneys she worked for advocated on her behalf for increased compensation, but the firm strictly adhered to the existing pay structure

and declined to pay her more. The two partners for whom she worked ultimately supplemented her salary personally—a gesture of respect but also a sign of impenetrable structural limitations.

One afternoon, an attorney at Karleen's firm pulled her aside and told her about an open judicial assistant position for Judge Dean D. Pregerson of the U.S. District Court in Los Angeles. The attorney, who had clerked for Judge Pregerson's father, Ninth Circuit Judge Harry Pregerson, encouraged Karleen to apply for the role. Even though it would entail a pay cut, she was attracted to the position because of its comprehensive benefits package, job security, and work-life balance. Her uncle spoke highly of the opportunity, and she accepted the offer.

Karleen enjoyed working in Pregerson's chambers because he fostered a collaborative and lively environment. Because of Karleen's consistency and reliability, she earned professional autonomy early on. She experienced no issues scheduling medical or other personal appointments because Pregerson trusted that she would complete her work timely without sacrificing quality. When her children began participating in after-school sports, she informed Judge Pregerson that she would need to leave early for their games. He said he completely understood, as he had children in sports, too.

Karleen eventually remarried, left her position with Pregerson, and moved to San Diego where her husband lived. Prior to her move, she asked Pregerson if he knew of any judicial assistant positions in San Diego. Pregerson then called Judge Wallace in San Diego to find out if Wallace was aware of any. It just so happened that Wallace needed a judicial assistant, and Karleen accepted the position.

CHAMBERS CULTURE

The cultural difference between Pregerson's and Wallace's chambers was striking. Wallace maintained a highly structured, serious environment with a rigorous schedule and strict protocol. Wallace would not hire externs to work in the chambers. The clerks were required to appear sharply at 8:30 a.m., even on days Wallace was out of the office. Wallace's calendar was concealed from the clerks. The clerks only had limited access to digital systems. However, such privacy

measures have dissipated with time. The doors in Wallace's chambers were required to be closed except for opening them to transition between rooms. Wallace fostered a reverence for decorum.

Initially, Karleen found Wallace's chambers isolating as there was minimal direct human interaction. Because Wallace's chambers was in a district court building, Karleen felt physically and professionally isolated from her peers in the Ninth Circuit. Nevertheless, Karleen appreciated the structure of the chambers because her home life was busy and unpredictable. Karleen decided to make her space more inviting by adding guest chairs. Subtle adjustments encouraged more clerks and staff to gather, chat, and enjoy a cup of coffee in her office.

THE JUDICIAL ASSISTANT ROLE

As a judicial assistant, Karleen did everything possible to free up Wallace's time so he could dedicate it to his judicial work. Some days, Wallace walked into the office with a bag of laundry. Karleen took the bag to the dry cleaners and coordinated pick-up with Wallace's wife. For many years, Wallace listed Karleen as a co-signer on his business bank accounts so she could help with his finances and take care of reimbursements. Karleen's duties for Wallace also included communicating with his wife to coordinate airport travel and logistics and otherwise ensure things were running smoothly in all areas of his life.

One of Karleen's more unique tasks included fixing Wallace's fancy ink pen. About four times a year, Wallace needed to sign formal documents and liked to sign them with his ceremonial ink pen. Because Wallace rarely used that pen, the ink repeatedly dried out and then stopped working. As a result, Wallace asked Karleen to fix his pen multiple times a year. To do so, she took the pen to the bathroom and cleaned it under running water in the sink.

Karleen's responsibilities also included updating Wallace's library, preparing his chambers, arranging his mail in a specified order, turning on designated lights, and ensuring that things were most optimally accessible. She also managed Wallace's schedule and calendar, which he liked to have accessible in multiple formats. She also managed Wallace's e-mail inbox, clearing out trivial e-mails, responding to e-mails when appropriate, routing case-related e-mails to appropriate law clerks, and printing out e-mails that

required Wallace's attention. To respond to e-mails, Wallace spoke into a recording device. Karleen then transcribed his dictations and composed his e-mail responses.

Judge Wallace also entrusted Karleen with highly substantive tasks over the years, including managing the caseload, compiling case updates, and contributing to internal documents and letters. Karleen often assisted Wallace with his written work because Wallace did not use a computer. When transcribing his dictations, she sometimes added suggestions for revisions in brackets, "[I think you meant this ...]." When Wallace traveled internationally, he returned with many tapes for Karleen to transcribe. Wallace liked to dictate reports on every day of his travel.

Throughout her career, Karleen took great pride in editing and proofreading. She liked to catch errors and be the last pair of eyes on all written work before it left the chambers. Even though some clerks resisted corrections at times, she took pride in bringing clarity and polish to the final work product.

CHALLENGES AND WORK PHILOSOPHY

Adjusting to all the technological changes over the years has been a challenge for Karleen. More recently, she noticed a cultural shift toward self-service troubleshooting. In the past, Karleen could call the IT department, and they would come to her office and fix the issue. Now, IT support comes in the form of a PDF on how to fix it herself; they will assist if she needs it, but only after attempting the PDF first. While the shift was frustrating, Karleen learned to adapt as best she could and found ways to minimize the use of applications where possible.

Karleen's experience in chambers taught her the value of transparency and taking responsibility for mistakes. Karleen learned to speak up when she made a mistake that affected the judge. "It was a lot less scary to speak up about mistakes than when I was just a kid working with my dad." Her experience has taught her that when mistakes are acknowledged promptly, they are often met with grace and respect.

Karleen believes the most crucial thing in life is to treat everyone with respect regardless of the structural hierarchy in place. Everyone at the core is the same—a human being. In the work context, Karleen found

that treating everyone with respect created the best environment for teams to thrive and work most effectively.

One of Karleen's guiding principles is the importance of maintaining healthy boundaries so that she can enjoy her life outside of work. Early in her career, she learned to be forthright with employers about her availability, which often required her to decline working overtime due to childcare obligations as a single mother. When Karleen and her second husband adopted children, she took a five-year hiatus and moved north to focus on raising them. When Judge Wallace asked Karleen to return to work in his chambers, she first negotiated her schedule to avoid traffic on her long commute. Setting boundaries early was essential to avoid building resentment.

Sometimes, Karleen accepted calls from Judge Wallace on the weekend. One day, she was in a shoe store with her daughters and took Wallace's call. She asked Wallace if it was urgent. He said no. She asked if it could wait until Monday. He responded, "Oh, sure." From that point, she realized it was fine to let calls go to voicemail if she was busy attending to her family and home. Karleen also realized that work was not her life. Work was a way to support her life.

Karleen also learned that the source of fulfillment she desired in life was found outside of work. She spent her time outside of work volunteering as a doula at UCSD, reading books, and taking classes in ceramics, art, and spirituality. Karleen fostered lasting friendships with a group of women that met for two to three hours a week for over 20 years. During their

time together, they shared with one another the blessings and challenges of life. Karleen also loved spending time with her family, which now includes five grandsons. It is evident that Karleen's pursuits outside of work significantly supported her success at work.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Over the course of more than two decades, Karleen has dedicated her career to supporting Judge Wallace behind the scenes. Karleen has proven to be an indispensable part of Wallace's team. Her support has enabled him to accomplish a significant amount of judicial work and spend a considerable amount of time overseas helping judiciaries in other countries improve their systems.

Karleen's reliability, discretion, and institutional knowledge have made her a trusted confidante and advisor to Wallace. As a result, Wallace has repeatedly encouraged other judges to retain judicial assistants and emphasized the value of the role, particularly because many judges have opted to hire additional clerks instead.

While you will not find Karleen's name on any opinions or correspondence drafted by Judge Wallace, Karleen's hands were likely the ones that typed each word on the page; and her eyes were likely the last pair to review it for accuracy and precision. Indeed, her influence is invisibly woven throughout Wallace's contributions over the last few decades.

Suzanne L. Schmidt is an attorney who works in the appellate practice group at Klinedinst PC.