



Sandra Robinson 2007-2008

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Sandra Robinson: My name is Sandra Robinson. I am a partner with The Cochran Firm in their DC office. I am a past president of Public Justice and have been a member of the board and a regular member for over 25 years. I have been with The Cochran Firm for about three years. Before that I was on my own for a while and then with Jack Olender & Associates. Jack Olender is the reason I was introduced to Public Justice.

[Sandy Dumain: How did Jack get you involved in Public Justice?]

Sandra: I joined Jack's firm in about 1990. There were two organizations that all the lawyers had to join. One was ATLA [[Association of Trial Lawyers of America](#)], which is now AAJ [Association for Justice] -- and the other one was then-Trial Lawyers for Public Justice, which is now Public Justice. He supported and maintained our memberships the entire time we were there and he was a strong supporter of Public Justice.

I was president 2007- 2008. I followed Al Brayton.

When I first joined, obviously, I was just a member, and we would always go to the conventions. We would always go to the Public Justice Galas and attend the Public Justice Membership Meetings. Eventually, I joined one of the committees and from there I was nominated to be on the board. I regularly attended the board meetings, annual meetings, mid-winter meetings, fall meetings. It was one of the activities I look forward to. Eventually, I was nominated to the Executive Committee and moved up the ladder to become president.

[Sandy Dumain: How did the organization change from when you first became a member to the time you became president?]

Sandra: There was consistent growth. When I joined the organization -- it is one of my favorite organizations to belong to. And I have always, always been impressed with how smart and how dedicated the attorneys are and equally impressed with how every member of the board was just as committed to the mission of Public Justice. That was then, and that is now.

I've seen growth in the organization. I know we've always tried to make the organization more diverse -- women and minorities -- and there's always been a focus on that. There was a focus on that when I was coming through the ranks and as president.

Just before I became president, there was a change in the name of the organization from Trial Lawyers for Public Justice to Public Justice. That happened about the same time that AAJ changed from American Association to Trial Lawyers to AAJ.

[Sandy: I guess that was in large part because "trial lawyer" had become a bad word [through] the right-wing in the Republican Party. President Bush was very effective in making "trial lawyers" look like they were evil and ruining our country's economy.]

Sandra: But we had to make sure, and a lot of our membership was very concerned that we weren't running away from being trial lawyers. We had to make sure that it was clear that we are not running away from being trial lawyers -- we're not running away from fighting the fight. It's just, unfortunately, with something that had been turned into a "negative concept," but we were not running away from who we were as trial lawyers. We have never done that even with the name change.

[Sandy: Yes, absolutely. I share your admiration for the staff at Public Justice. The lawyers are uniformly, incredibly smart and dedicated people. They could be making a lot more money someplace else. They are dedicated to the work that the organization does. I had to single out one thing about my involvement in Public Justice that I've loved, it's getting to know these incredibly smart, dedicated people.]

Sandra: You have hit on the head what my real love for the organization is. I would sit and still do sit in the board meetings in awe of just the brilliance. And getting the emails now about the successes that the staff has been having over the years, it makes you so proud and it's just amazing the work that's being done in civil rights, in Title IX, in

environmental protection, in access to the courts, in qualified immunity. And we've expanded and grown so much. The Food Project and what we've taken on, even now during the pandemic with workplace safety.

I guess that's what I would say about Public Justice: it's always been a dynamic organization; it's always been a courageous organization. It's always been a fighting organization. But I see now that it's also a creative organization that the staff, the board – we begin to recognize and focus on areas that really need to be focused on and really need to be changed or advocated for. We're not afraid to take on those challenges. That's what really impresses me about everybody that's associated with that organization.

You can tell, I hope, that I've got a real love for this group of people. When I was coming through the ranks there was Al Brayton, there was Mona Lisa Wallace. There was Joan Claybrook. Of course, all the staff and other people. I could just go on and name so many people who have impressed me -- but who have also just become good friends. I think that speaks for our organization, too.

We may have some disagreements about process or something, but in the end, we know what our goal is. We know what our objectives are. I think there's a genuine love and respect among, and between all of us. I know I feel that, and you know that, too.

[Sandy: Yes, absolutely. For me, I'm eternally grateful to Steve Fineman for having gotten me involved with Public Justice.

Sandra: Steve's a great guy.

Sandy: What do you remember about your term as president?]

Sandra: At that time, there was a big emphasis on the [Access to Justice](#) project. We had just come off our 25th anniversary. There was adjusting to the name change that had just occurred from TLPJ to Public Justice. I can't think of any one particular case that stuck in my mind about that time. We were coordinating with the Minority Caucus with AAJ, trying to develop more of a relationship there that had already been started, but trying to bolster that relationship.

Unfortunately, we continue to fight but unfortunately, we find ourselves fighting the same issues too many times, over and over again. I can only say that I'm glad and proud that Public Justice is one of the organizations that has stayed in the fight and continues to be involved.

[Sandy: Obviously, voting rights is an enormous concern right now. It's just staggering to see what's going on around the country. I'm not sure that it's going to make any difference in New York, but the swing states where they're making it harder and harder to vote, it's just very disturbing.]

Sandra: It's very disturbing. I recently read the [autobiography of Frederick Douglas](#). I was astounded and saddened by the fact that we are continuing to fight that, as well as other civil rights issues. As I was reading that and I was reading it as we were going through our last presidential election, and the similarity in the situations was just troubling. That we're repeating those same ugly mistakes. Again, we've got organizations like Public Justice that keep fighting. That's good.

[Sandy: Do you have any thoughts of where Public Justice is going from here? I know it's a hard question.]

Sandra: It's not a hard question when you think about the foundation of the organization, and you think about its mission. I've been in meetings where we have a wordsmithed the mission to try to get it just right. But I think if we're a living body, we know who we are as an organization. The good thing is there are young people who continue to become a part of it, young lawyers, young staff, board members.

The board consists of people from different practices -- I do medical malpractice -- with different views and different insights about situations. We welcome new energy and new ideas, new ways of doing things.

So I see growth continuing. I see us continuing to keep our eye on where the tough spots are in this country, where the advocacy is needed, and responding to that. We are a fierce group of people. I'm proud to be associated with the lawyers at Public Justice, who are bold and dynamic, who are smart, and willing to take it on.

So I don't see us resting or sitting on your laurels or something. I don't see us saying, "Oh, we'd done that and we've done all we can do. Boy, look at us, aren't we great?" This is a group that is forever recognizing what needs to be done and finding ways to get equality. Finding ways to attack, bullying. Finding ways to advocate for people who are in need, who can't do it themselves. To fight abuse, to fight corporate abuse, to fight institutional abuse, to fight racism. And I don't see us resting. I don't see us attracting people who will do that in the future. I expect this group to-- It has grown since I joined it in membership, and it has grown in the number of projects that are now being taken on. This is a living being as far as I can tell. That's my thinking.

I love being a trial lawyer. I love it. I get nervous for anything where I've got to say something or be observed, but once I'm prepping for it and I'm in it, I love the whole process. Being in the courtroom, witnesses, exhibits, cross-examination, especially, is a lot of fun. I even love depositions, getting ready for trials. I just love the whole process. I've been very fortunate to be doing what I want to do.