



Mona Lisa Wallace (2009-2010)

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Mona Lisa Wallace: My name is Mona Lisa Wallace. I am with a firm in Salisbury, a small town in North Carolina. I've been practicing almost 40 years. But I've been on the board of Public Justice for almost 30 years. It has been a very major part of my life and my professional career.

I was one of the first women trial lawyers, especially around the South, and I had probably [the second asbestos case in the late '70s/early '80s in North Carolina](#). I represented power plant workers and mill workers, and insulation workers.

In the early '90s, a settlement was going to take place. Candidly, it was with [Owens-Corning](#), if I recall correctly. It was a big asbestos corporation, and they were going to settle with asbestos lawyers all around the country for very significant sums of money, and that would've been for a lot of my clients. But part of the settlement term was that the settlement would forbid other individuals in the future who had not been diagnosed yet with disease because asbestos diseases, including cancers, are latent and progressive. They occur 10 to 20 years after the initial exposure.

So when I found out that accepting the settlement would mean that in the future, the friends and the coworkers of those I represented when they developed the disease, it would be impossible for them to sue -- that's when I heard about Public Justice. And I reached out to them -- and that case ultimately went to the US Supreme Court. I was there with Laurence Tribe and [Public Justice was](#) there. [We were successful in stopping that settlement to go forward](#).

Until that [company ultimately filed bankruptcy](#), a very, very significant number of injured workers, including individuals with cancer, wouldn't have had the benefit of their access to justice and right to court had Public Justice not been one of the organizations that stepped in.

The impact is important today. It's probably one of the most important cases in history, in my opinion. It means that a company cannot generally, and to my knowledge, it hasn't been allowed since that decision from the US Supreme Court. (and I think the name of the case if I remember back so many years was MKEM), but you can't settle a case and cut off the rights of all future victims.

That case made it very, very difficult, if not impossible, for the future of jurisprudence.

I'm embarrassed to tell you, but I've been on the Public Justice board for almost 30 years. It was in the early '90s, and I'm still on the board. I was president of the organization -- and proud to be -- in 2010. I've been on the executive committee a number of times.

I guess the concern I've always had is how to get the word out to the lawyers.

Back then, I was a lawyer in a small town that if you need help and it is a very big issue, and it is the right cause and a good cause -- defending the rights of others, getting access to the court, protecting the environment, gender inequality, all of the wonderful things we do -- there is an organization out there that you can go to that will help you. And they'll do it for the right reason.

There have been so many cases, but there is an event I'd like to share with you. It's one of my favorites in my 40-year history.

I was on the advisory board of Wake Law School, so I was one of probably 10 women who were asked to have lunch privately with former [Justice Ruth Ginsburg](#). And going around the table, she asked each of us to identify what we were interested in and who we were, and she was lovely. I said, "I'm Mona Lisa Wallace. I'm president of Public Justice." When I said that, she immediately --- Justice Ginsberg -- started talking about what an incredible organization it was. She was familiar with all of the cases for quality and athletics for men and women, discrimination, racial equality. She just started reciting the cases that Public Justice had done, and she was familiar with all of them. I guess I was just awe struck by that.

The thing about this organization that I don't think people will ever be able to comprehend is, first, the respect that each of us have for the others who are involved in it. It's the best lawyers literally in the country and those with the best intentions. We all are extremely close, my virtual brothers and sisters that I've always and will always keep up with are former presidents of Public Justice or members of the board. When we have a death, for example, of which was recently of someone we all love -- [Jack Landskroner](#) -- it's like a death in our family.

It's such incredible work they do and such commitment that they have for justice. The trajectory, I guess, is that over the years, it's expanded into a lot more areas. Over time, its membership has more than tripled. I think when I was there, it was several hundred, and when I was president, it was several thousand. It's continuing to grow. We've got a second office -- one in California now and one in DC.

I just think it is the best organization in this country, and I wish there was a better way that we could share that with the rest of the lawyers and others interested in injustice in America.

I think the cases that we've taken to the Supreme Court and the precedents that we've set were some of the most important in history.

We have so much more to do, especially as everyone who's watching this recognizes what's been going on in the world today. It's been a time when more lawyers, better lawyers, more access to justice should be allowed as opposed to literally squashed, I guess, by state legislatures and bad decisions by Congress. I think it has an incredible future. I think it is the future, and I just can't say enough nice things about this organization.

I have to say that the leadership with Arthur Bryant for some 20-plus years that he was our executive director and now Paul Bland -- those gentlemen are just exceptional, as are the members of the executive committee and the board.

I just want to thank everyone that I've had the honor and the privilege to be a part of Public Justice. It's a big part of my life.