

# Justice Mary Yu: Crossing Boundaries to the Supreme Court

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Washington State Supreme Court Justice Mary Yu, 57, was officiated on Jan. 12, and says she will run for a six-year reelection next year. Photo: Janelle Retka

By Janelle Retka

Even a little glimpse into Justice Mary Yu's past provides an understanding of why the newest Washington State Supreme Court justice brings an unprecedented understanding of minorities being served in the courts.

Growing up in working-class Chicago in the '60s, the family's living room served as Mary's bedroom. Her Chinese father worked in a factory, building what her brother calls the "Cadillac of tool cabinets." The small amount of English and Spanish he acquired in the factories served as his communication with his Mexican wife and two kids. Their biracial family was unusual in their predominantly Irish and Italian neighborhood. While her brother walked the railroad with their grandfather looking for breakage in the tracks, Mary spent her free time within the limits of [Bridgeport](#), reading and playing with cousins who lived nearby.

Now, Yu, 57, splits her week between living in downtown Seattle and Olympia. She wakes up at 5 a.m., runs or rows, and indulges in her guilty pleasure: reading the morning papers with an unadulterated cup of coffee, "straight, no milk, no sugar, no nothing." She then begins her day as Justice Mary Yu, the first Latina, first Asian-American, first openly gay Washington State Supreme Court Justice.

Favoring crisp black from head to toe, Yu is polished. Her shoulders are back, she walks with determination in each step, and her eyes are fixed when talking with someone. She leans forward when speaking as if to propel herself into conversation, and her gentle tone and demeanor make her warm and welcoming.

Yu is a woman of humility. She sees her accomplishments as something anyone can achieve, and hopes people coming up behind her can see that as well.

“The hurdles are always there,” said Yu. “How we view one another is always a problem in the sense that we have a tendency to put people in boxes. Getting out of that mentality and thinking and not being trapped by it was probably the greatest challenge. I think it’s overcome by hard work.”



Richard Yu, Justice Yu’s older brother, lives in Seattle with his family and attended the ceremony at which Justice Yu took the oath of office. Photo: Janelle Retka

Yu and her brother, Richard Yu, grew up in the shadow of “[White Sox park](#),” where racial boundaries defined sections of the neighborhood. But their father had a different mentality, Richard said. Having traveled from China to Chicago, boundaries didn’t alarm him.

“My father was really independent,” Richard said. “He would take both of us out on Saturdays and Sundays. He didn’t care where he went. We would just get on a bus or a train and take off and see where it goes. We would be in an all-Black neighborhood, he had no problem. If it had the store he wanted, we would go there. But no one else would do that, anywhere.”

Yu and her brother attended Catholic school. After she [graduated](#), she became the first in her family to attend college, receiving a degree in theology from Dominican University. Soon after, she began social justice work for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago. After 10 years and a graduate degree in theology, Yu decided that rather than appealing to someone's heart for positive change, she wanted to make it illegal to discriminate based on race or social class.

She decided to study law.

Yu got her law degree at the University of Notre Dame, eventually moving to Seattle to follow her partner at the time to Seattle University, where she remains a jurist in residence and law teacher during winter term, and became deputy chief of staff to [King County Prosecutor Norm Maleng](#). She fell in love with Seattle, got involved in the community and supporting minorities like herself, and served 14 years as a trial court judge on the [King County Superior Court](#) beginning in 2000.

"She's always the person looking at the most marginalized individuals and how are we best serving them in our communities and how are we creating the kind of community we want to live in," said [Megan Karch](#), the CEO of [FareStart](#).

FareStart is a Seattle based nonprofit that works to help homeless youth and adults get the education and training they need to gain and maintain employment. Yu is moving into her 10th year as a member of the board.

She also finds the time to officiate adoptions and marriages, co-chair the [Washington State Minority and Justice Commission](#) and co-chair the [Washington Leadership Institute](#).

In 2012, Yu celebrated the legalization of same-sex marriage in Washington by officiating some of the [first marriages](#) at 12:01 a.m. on December 9. [Emily and Sarah Cofer](#) had been in Yu's court before when Emily adopted their daughter, Carter, who will be three at the end of February. It was important that Yu be the one to officiate their marriage because of her caring role in the adoption.

"She said how great it was that we had our friends and family to support us," said Emily, reflecting on her adoption process. "And she reminded us how important it was for us to be that support for Carter, and to love who Carter loves."



Justice Mary Yu (center), her brother Richard Yu (left) and cousin Yolanda in Chicago, when Mary was an infant. Photo: courtesy of Mary Yu

Last May, Yu filled the seat of retiring Supreme Court [Justice Jim Johnson](#) and in November ran unopposed for the [remaining two years of the position](#), earning her own seat on the court on January 12. She plans to run for the next six-year term in the fall of 2016.

“I think she’s pretty progressive on social issues,” said UW law professor [Hugh Spitzer](#) as he compared Yu to her predecessor. “But I’m not sure that’s going to make a whole heck of a lot of difference in decisions that she writes. I think she’ll just call them the way she sees them.”

Spitzer is an expert on the Washington State Supreme Court and co-author of the book [The Washington State Constitution](#). “I would categorize her as a very professional judge,” Spitzer said, “with no political ideological ax to grind.”

“The job isn’t to try to change the law,” Yu said about her role on the Supreme Court. “It’s really about how we interpret and apply the law fairly in a particular context.”

Yu hopes she has made an impact on the court system by providing a welcoming and fair setting to everyone, and by training other lawyers to do the same. She hopes to see the shifts in society that come from the decisions of the Supreme Court in time, though, and wishes her parents were still alive to see the fruits of their labor.

“It would have been wonderful for them to realize that in one generation, you can accomplish this,” Yu said.