

# Justices show personal sides at Heritage forum

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TOPPENISH — Washington Supreme Court Justice Mary Fairhurst was afraid she was going to die, and for good reason: She had recently been diagnosed with late-stage cancer.

But after beating cancer just a few years ago, Fairhurst overcame that fear, and has since taken on others, such as avoiding risk-taking and getting into a relationship, choosing to live life to the fullest, she told an audience at Heritage University.

“What would you attempt to do if you could not fail?” Fairhurst asked the audience in a rare personal revelation for a Supreme Court justice. “Fear of failure is one of the things that holds people back.”

Fairhurst was one of five members of the state’s highest court participating in a public forum Monday afternoon at Heritage University. The Supreme Court came to the school on the Yakama Nation reservation as part of its traveling program, taking cases on the road and to the public, getting out of the rarified atmosphere of the Temple of Justice in Olympia.

Joining Fairhurst at the forum were Chief Justice Barbara Madsen and Justices Steven Gonzalez, Mary Yu and Debra Stephens.

Gonzalez, who spoke at Heritage last fall, said when the court conducts a hearing at a campus, the justices will do a question-and-answer session afterwards. But those usually involve matters of court procedure or legal issues. He said Heritage officials requested a separate, more informal forum, a format he said he would suggest the justices use at other locales.

Madsen said the questions were refreshing, and went along with the program’s mission of helping people better connect with the court.

“I think it’s important for the people we serve to understand that we were not born with silver spoons,” Madsen said. “We all have challenges.”

Heritage students Murry Hannigan and Harli Moran said it was “inspiring” to hear the justices talk about their lives and their challenges. Hannigan said she was impressed when the justices revealed their vulnerable sides.

Gonzalez and Yu, for example, both admitted to having a fear of public speaking.

For Gonzalez, he found arguing cases before a jury helped him earlier in his career as a prosecutor, as he could stand behind a podium, and there were court rules guiding what he could say.

Yu, who also said she had a fear of failing, said she carefully scripts her public addresses, reviewing them multiple times. But, she noted that when she gave a TED talk recently at the state women's prison, she was not able to use notes, but said she made it through.

Yu, a former King County Superior Court judge who was appointed to the Supreme Court last year, referred to the TED talk again when she responded to a question posed to all justices about what criminal they would like to have lunch with sometime. Yu said she would like to sit down with a woman she met at the prison whom she had earlier sentenced to life without parole.

"She told me she was working with other women, and helping them," Yu said.

Gonzalez said he'd also sit down with people he had previously sentenced as a judge to see how their lives were going since then and if they thought the trial was fair.

Stephens' answer was short, and to the point.

"Galileo, for the obvious reasons," Stephens said, referring to the Renaissance astronomer who was placed under house arrest for advocating that the Earth revolved around the sun.

## **Related Information**

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If you go

- The Washington Supreme Court will hear oral arguments in three cases this morning at the Smith Family Hall at Heritage University in Toppenish.
- The hearings begin at 9 a.m., when justices will hear arguments in the case of *State v. Mecham*, which involves prosecutors arguing in trial that a defendant refused to take a field sobriety test because it would have revealed his intoxication.
- At 9:30 a.m., attorneys will argue *State v. O'Dell*, where justices will decide if a judge erred by not instructing the jury that a man accused of second-degree child rape reasonably believed the victim was older.
- The court will hear arguments in the case of *Demetrio v. Sakuma Bros. Farms Inc.* at 1:30 p.m. The case addresses the issue of whether employers are required to pay piece-rate workers for rest breaks.

