

State supreme court justice
Raquel Montoya-Lewis,
photographed in the
capitol's Temple of Justice.



The Kind Jurist

Raquel Montoya-Lewis
Washington Supreme Court Justice

When Raquel Montoya-Lewis walks the halls of Olympia's Temple of Justice, intimidation fairly radiates from its marble pillars—and from the long line of supreme court justice portraits. "There are zero who look like me," says the five-foot, onetime law professor, appointed in December to the state's highest court. This year, its nine justices will rule on drug sentences and potato farm disputes, sexual assault exams and, inevitably and repeatedly, the constitutionality of car tabs; Montoya-Lewis will run to retain her seat in November. As only the second Native American state supreme court justice in the country, she wields insight from her Pueblo of Isleta tribe and her mother's Jewish roots, from tribal courts and a stint on Whatcom County Superior Court. That collected wisdom boils down to a simple directive tattooed on her forearm, lettered around an eagle feather and gavel: "Be kind. Do justice." —AW

My father was in the air force. I lived in England, Spain, Texas, South Carolina. When I was about 15, we went back to New Mexico, where our tribe is.

My dad and I were the only Native people anywhere we went, until we came back to New Mexico. It took the form of bullying, rac-

ism from teachers and peers, and just outright discrimination.

There are adobe homes in Isleta that have been occupied for 2,000 years. I felt very rooted there and felt a real sense that we've been here forever, we will be here forever.

My father always talked about the reason I was where I was: because of the suffering and the persistence of my ancestors. There wasn't a lot of room in my dad's view of the world to complain about my math homework.

My mother's Jewish, so I definitely grew up identifying as Jewish. That also came with the idea of coming from people who survived.

You either have to be a very decisive person [as a trial judge] or you have to be someone who can act like you are.

People are looking to you to be the decision maker. And if you're not, or you're wishy-washy about it, they don't have direction.

If they were able to solve the problem, they would have done it without you.

It's very hard to be literally in judgment of the people that you live with. And it's not something I think anyone should take lightly.

In tribal courts, you have the flexibility and really the responsibility to understand who

the people are, where they come from in terms of their families, and how they fit in the community.

As far as I know, I'm the only person in the country who's ever been able to make the leap from tribal courts to state superior court. That path is virtually unheard of.

At the announcement for this position, one of the members of the press asked me what I would say to people who said that I had only gotten that position because of my heritage, or that it was an affirmative action appointment.

Every time I've done well in anything, people want to chalk it up to being given some kind of special treatment. And the reverse has been true.

In my experience, I have had to overcome other people's views about my abilities rather than being given some sort of extra credit for being Native.

Being here, it's this incredible luxury of getting to think about questions of law, the ability to talk to my colleagues about what they think about a case.

There is also a lot more responsibility to get it right. Because whatever we do here impacts the rest of the state in really significant ways. ☐