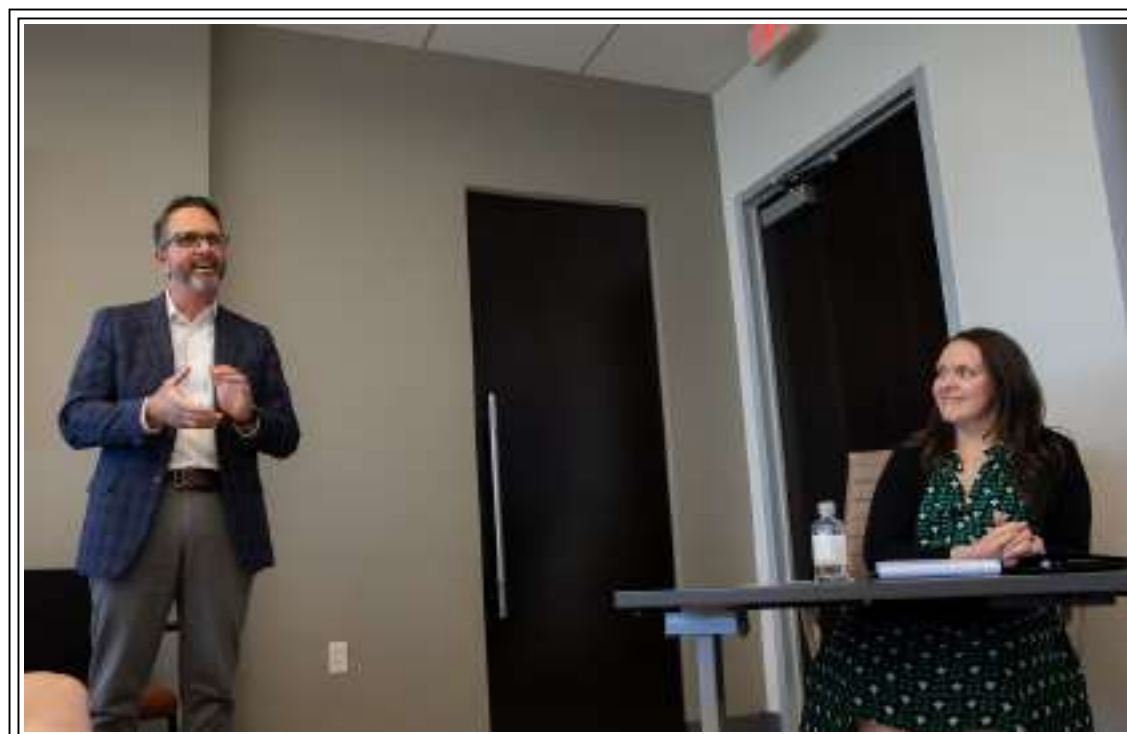


The very next day, the Society was at Miller Johnson's Grand Rapids location for

# **The Legacy of Women on the Michigan Supreme Court: A Conversation with Current Justice Elizabeth Welch and Former Justice Maura Corrigan**

If you could sit for an evening with one of Michigan's Supreme Court justices and ask that individual about their life, career, journey to the Court, and any number of things, what would you ask? What if it was not just one justice, but two? On June 13, 2024, West Michigan attorneys, clerks, judges, former State Bar presidents, and two United States District Court judges crowded into Miller Johnson's conference center to do just that.



Society President and Miller Johnson partner, Joseph Gavin, introduced Justice Elizabeth Welch and Retired Justice Maura Corrigan to the audience, along with moderator Alison Khorey, who also practices at Miller Johnson.



### **Journey to the Michigan Supreme Court**

Each justice<sup>1</sup> was asked how their career led them to the Michigan Supreme Court, and their paths were fairly different with some key similarities. Each justice had a successful career before ascending the bench, though Justice Welch primarily began her career in private firms before starting her own business, and Justice Corrigan worked in government agencies before she was appointed to the Michigan Court of Appeals.

Both justices reached the high Court at age fifty and both received calls from important individuals requesting they consider running for the elected office. And both initially said “no.”

In 1998, Justice Corrigan was serving as the chief judge for the Court of Appeals – having been appointed to that court six years earlier and elected twice in the ensuing years – and was working late when her phone rang. Justice Corrigan “liked to pretend [she] was [her] secretary after 5 p.m. and answered, ‘Chief Judge Corrigan’s office.’” Governor John Engler was on the line and announced that Justice Patricia Boyle was not going to run for re-election, and that he “wanted Justice Corrigan to run for the Supreme Court.” He’d asked before, in 1996, and received a firm “no.” This time, though, she would think about it: the prospect of succeeding Justice Boyle – who’d hired Corrigan into the Wayne County prosecutor’s office years earlier – was both daunting and providential. Justice Corrigan went

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the below and on the following pages is a paraphrase of the Justices’ remarks. Direct quotations are included where applicable. We hope to post the video and/or transcript.

home and spoke with her husband, Joe Grano, a professor at Wayne State University, who said, “Go for it, you ought to do it.”

What Justice Corrigan did not highlight then was that when Professor Grano said “Go for it,” he was very sick with Multiple System Atrophy and had been ill for many years. He would pass away the same year Justice Corrigan began her first term as Chief Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court, so his support of a statewide campaign was incredible.



While Justice Corrigan began in Ohio (she was born in Cleveland) and moved to Michigan, Justice Welch did the opposite: she was born in Grand Rapids and moved to Ohio to attend law school. After earning a law degree from Ohio State University, she worked in Louisville, Kentucky. Eventually, Justice Welch “realized that if [she and her husband] wanted to have a family and maintain [their] careers, they were going to need back-up.” They made the decision to return to Grand Rapids where a village of parents and grandparents awaited them. Justice Welch began at Miller Johnson and later launched off into her own work with small firms and nonprofits.

As her children entered school, Justice Welch became involved in public school advocacy. A key budget item would be cut and “you start investigating what’s going on and get sucked in and before you know it, you’re in the Capitol trying to tell people how to vote.” This led to certain political relationships and Justice Welch began recruiting people to run at all levels – “School Board, City Commission, [State] Senate, [State] House” – and helped candidates launch their campaigns. She herself later served as “Vice President and a Trustee on the East Grand Rapids Public Schools Board of Education.”

She did this work as a volunteer – while also running her law practice and raising her children – because she cared deeply about “elevating smart people, particularly smart women.” But it was only a matter of time before people started asking her to run for higher office. And, like Justice Corrigan, Justice Welch initially said “no.” Then a couple of years went by, and things had changed: “Justice Markman was retiring, leaving an open seat.” Chief Justice Bridget McCormack called, the Governor called, and the same folks who had asked several years before asked again and Justice Welch said “yes.”

It was the end of 2019, and, suffice it to say, Justice Welch’s campaign, which took off in 2020, was a very different format than Justice Corrigan’s.

## Women Are Regularly Asked This Question

One of the usual questions asked of women in high positions and very demanding fields is how they balance career and family. Both justices noted that their male colleagues are not asked this question as regularly.

Justice Welch remarked that her “first husband, Jerry, was an excellent partner, both professionally and with their children, and they divided the duties” – for example, he was the primary cook. Her experience was unique and many of her peers did not have the same. She also reiterated that she made an intentional decision to move back to Grand Rapids where there was familial support.

Justice Corrigan also noted that she didn’t feel well-qualified to talk about this topic because her marriage was so unusual, with her “husband being ill for half of their marriage and seriously ill for the last three years of their marriage.” There wasn’t any work-life balance in her household: she had to do it all.



### Justice Elizabeth Welch

- \* Generation X
- \* Born in Michigan
- \* B.A. Penn State University
- \* J.D. Ohio State University
- \* Practiced in Louisville, Kentucky and Grand Rapids, Michigan
- \* Joined the Supreme Court in the midst of a Global Pandemic
- \* Began service under a female Chief Justice – Bridget M. McCormack
- \* Served with a female majority in 2021, 2022, 2023
- \* Married, with four adult children

### Justice Maura D. Corrigan

- \* Baby Boomer Generation
- \* Born in Ohio
- \* B.A. Marygrove College
- \* J.D. University of Detroit Law
- \* Practiced primarily in Detroit before Court of Appeals appointment
- \* Joined the Supreme Court the year before the New Millennium
- \* Began service under a female Chief Justice – Elizabeth Weaver
- \* Served as Chief Justice from 2001 to 2004
- \* Served with a female majority in 2009, 2010
- \* Widowed, with two adult children

## That New Associate You Mentor Now Could Become a Supreme Court Justice

Each of the Justices were asked about their mentors. Justice Corrigan responded that her mentors were her late husband, Joseph Grano; former United States District Court Judge and Justice Patricia Boyle, who was Chief of Research Training and Appeals at the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office while Corrigan worked there; and Leonard Gilman, Chief of the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office Criminal Division and later U.S. Attorney. All three were notably good lawyers, who "wanted to do the right thing, and saw the profession as a high calling."

Justice Welch reminisced on her grandmother's influence in her life. Elaine "Laney" Merrill Mitchell, who passed away on March 29, 2018, was a strong source of stability in Justice Welch's youth and a bit of a force to be reckoned with in the neighborhood. Another mentor was Miller Johnson partner (now of counsel) Jon March, who graduated from law school the same year Justice Corrigan received her B.A. When Justice Welch started at Miller Johnson, she worked on a case with Jon March and found him to be a legal giant and a highly supportive mentor. Justice Welch also highlighted her involvement with the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan and other legal associations.

### The Privilege Of Service

To no one's surprise, each justice is incredibly fond of their time on the Court. Justice Corrigan noted that "I value my law degree more than anything." Justice Welch remarked "It has been an absolute privilege. I love it."

The justices are also nonchalant at their historical roles and their positions in history. Justice Welch noted that it is no longer "a big deal" for the Michigan Supreme Court to have a female majority; indeed, it is a regular occurrence in our state.



We had the opportunity to celebrate Justice Corrigan's birthday, which is June 14.

The Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society includes Biographical Blurbs on each of our justices. Justice Corrigan and Justice Welch's information is below:

### Maura D. Corrigan

Served from 1999 through 2011  
Chief Justice: 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004

Maura D. Corrigan was born in 1948 in Cleveland, Ohio. She received her B.A. from Marygrove College in 1969, graduating magna cum laude, and her J.D. from the University of Detroit in 1973, graduating cum laude.



Corrigan's legal career began when she served as a law clerk to the Honorable John Gillis of the Michigan Court of Appeals. She then moved on to become an assistant prosecuting attorney in Wayne County from 1974 to 1979; in 1979 she was appointed Chief of Appeals in the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Michigan. In 1986, she was promoted to Chief Assistant U.S. Attorney, becoming the first woman to hold that position. In 1989, Corrigan became a partner in the law firm of Plunkett Cooney, specializing in litigation and appeals.

Corrigan's judicial service began when Governor John Engler appointed her to the Michigan Court of Appeals in March of 1992. In 1992 and 1994 she was elected to terms on that court. In 1997 she was appointed Chief Judge of the appeals court, a position she held for two years before her election to the Michigan Supreme Court in 1998. In 2001 and 2003, her peers on the Michigan Supreme Court elected Corrigan Chief Justice.

Corrigan has participated in numerous community and professional activities. She is a past president of the Incorporated Society of Irish American Lawyers and the Detroit Chapter of the Federal Bar Association. She served as a public member of the Michigan Law Revision Commission from 1991-1998, as an executive board member of the Michigan Judges Association, and as a member of the Judicial Advisory Board of the Center for Law and Organizational Economics at the University of Kansas Law School. She also served on the Board of Directors of Boyssville of Michigan.

Corrigan won many awards for her professional achievements, including the U.S. Department of Justice Director's Award for Outstanding Performance as an Assistant U.S. Attorney and the Federal Bar Association's Leonard Gilman Award to the 1989 Outstanding Practitioner of Criminal Law. She also published in journals such as the Wayne Law Review and University of Toledo Law Review and taught as an adjunct professor at Wayne State University Law School.

Corrigan is the widow of Wayne State University Distinguished Professor of Law Joseph D. Grano and is the mother of Megan and Daniel.

## **Elizabeth M. Welch**

Served from 2021 to present

Justice Elizabeth M. Welch joined the Michigan Supreme Court on January 1, 2021. She currently serves as the Justice Liaison on data gathering and transparency in the civil, criminal, and juvenile justice systems, as well as the Liaison to the Michigan Judicial Institute. She co-chairs the Diversity Equity & Inclusion Commission, co-chairs the Justice for All Commission's (JFA) Technology and Data Sharing Work Group, and serves on the JFA Communications Work Group and JFA Resource Work Group.

Justice Welch received her law degree from Ohio State University (where she served as Research Editor of the Law Journal) and her undergraduate degree from Penn State University. After law school, she practiced labor/employment law at large law firms located in Louisville, KY and Grand Rapids, MI prior to starting her own law practice. She also published many articles in academic and industry publications, including serving as a Chapter Editor for The Developing Labor Law treatise.

During her 25-year career, she counseled nonprofit organizations, businesses, and individuals on labor/employment law matters and represented her clients in arbitrations, administrative agency matters, and litigation. Justice Welch also handled pro bono abuse/neglect matters, worked as counsel to a criminal defense law practice, and counseled nonprofit organizations on board governance. Justice Welch is a trained mediator and volunteered for many years with the West Michigan Dispute Resolution Center.

Justice Welch has been a member of numerous professional and nonprofit boards, including serving as a Trustee for the Grand Rapids Bar Association and a board member for the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan – Western Region (where she also served as President). Justice Welch is currently Vice President of the Steelcase Foundation and a Trustee of the Grand Valley University Foundation.

Prior to her joining the Supreme Court, Justice Welch served as Vice President and a Trustee on the East Grand Rapids Public Schools Board of Education. She worked with leaders across the state to engage and train

community members to be advocates for local public schools and regularly worked with legislators on public school policy. She also served on the School Finance Research Collaborative (a statewide coalition of education stakeholders who commissioned a study to determine the true cost of educating a child in Michigan). Justice Welch also served on the Grand Rapids Mayor's Task Force in 2013 and 2016, which was charged with examining and improving local elections.

Justice Welch has received several awards in recognition for her public school and other community work. She and her husband Brian Schwartz live in Grand Rapids and have four adult children.



This photo includes a bit of a who's who in West Michigan law and a mini-legacy of Women in Michigan law, as former State Bar of Michigan president and Rhoades McKee attorney, Bruce Courtade so eloquently noted during the question-and-answer period.

Retired State Court Administrator and past president of the National Judicial College Chad Schmucker observes, with Michigan State Capitol Historian and Curator Valerie Marvin in the background. In the next row, with her back to the camera is Janet Welch, Society Secretary and the first woman to serve as the executive director of the State Bar of Michigan. Next to Janet is Senior United States District Court Judge Janet Neff, who also served as one of the Michigan Supreme Court's first female commissioners; Nancy Diehl, legendary chief of the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office and former State Bar of Michigan president, sits next to Judge Neff. Finally, United States District Court Judge Jane Beckering, Judge Neff's successor, sits to Nancy Diehl's left.

The event was incredible and the Society hopes to have many such gatherings in the future. Thank you, Miller Johnson, for hosting, and Justices Welch and Corrigan for participating!