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Female judges reflect on careers during panel to celebrate women's suffrage

- [SKYLER ROSSI](#)

When Christine Carpenter, Ann Covington and Ellen Roper were accepted into MU's Law School decades ago, they said they were told by the dean not to attend.

But they didn't listen. Instead, they graduated and became prominent judges in Missouri.

Casey Clevenger had a different experience: She said women made up most of her professors and classmates during her time in the early 2000s at the Thomas Jefferson School of Law in San Diego, California.

"I'm still waiting to discover that I'm a woman in a man's world," she said.

These four women, now current and former Missouri judges, shared their experiences at Monday's Holly Burgess Public Policy Forum at the Columbia Public Library.

Covington was the first woman to serve as Chief Justice of the Missouri Supreme Court; Roper was a longtime Circuit Court Judge and also served as a special judge for the Missouri Supreme Court and the Missouri Court of Appeals for the Western District; Carpenter was a longtime 13th Judicial Circuit Court judge and drug court commissioner; and Clevenger currently oversees six treatment courts in Boone and Callaway counties.

The women shared their perspectives as female judges, their inspiration to become lawyers and the challenges of their journeys. They also talked about the legacy of their work in the justice system.

Carpenter, Covington and Roper told stories about being called names such as "honey" or "sweetie" or being ignored all together in court by male colleagues.

Covington said that because of her efforts, the written rules for judicial conduct in Missouri now use gender-neutral pronouns instead of male ones.

For Clevenger, being a judge has shown her preschool-aged daughter that women can be anything they want to be.

David Lile, host of KFRU's "Columbia Morning" show, moderated the panel. Many of the judges' answers made the audience laugh or gasp, as did Lile's questions and commentary. For instance, he told Clevenger that he was going to keep her on the witness stand a little longer after asking her multiple follow-up questions.

Around 80 people attended, and many said they came to hear the perspectives of the women and learn about their experiences as judges.

Megan Reed, 26, said she's considering going to law school and was interested in hearing what they had to say about the future for women who practice law.

Another attendee, Joan Menser, 72, said she has been longtime friends with and admirers of Covington, Roper and Carpenter, and that she came to get insight into their careers.

"I don't know many forums where female judges are gathered together to share their ideas about our community," she said.

This year's forum is part of a series hosted by the League of Women Voters to celebrate women's suffrage, Marilyn McLeod, president the league, said.

"Doing some of the research or hearing the different speakers, we're just learning a lot — things that have been forgotten," McLeod said. "This provides an opportunity for us to review history. It doesn't hurt, ever, to take a look back and see how far we've come."

The event was co-sponsored by the American Association of University Women-Columbia branch, the League of Women Voter of Columbia-Boone County and the Columbia Public Library.

“I don’t want to be the last,” Covington said about her role as Chief Justice during the forum. “By which I mean, I want to do everything as perfectly as possible and never ever let anybody say, ‘See, we shouldn’t of had a woman there.’ It makes me a little emotional, even now, because I carried that very heavily.

“I am the first woman, and, please, I don’t want to be the last.”

Supervising editor is Tynan Stewart.