In 2012, Justice Barbara Madsen was unanimously elected by her colleagues to serve a second term as the 55th Chief Justice of the Washington State Supreme Court – the second woman to hold the position. As Chief Justice, she is the court’s principal spokesperson, presides over Supreme Court hearings and conferences, and co-chairs the state’s Board for Judicial Administration. The voters elected Justice Madsen as the third woman to serve on the Washington State Supreme Court in 1992, and she was re-elected in 1998, 2004, and 2010. In her 21 years on the bench, Chief Justice Madsen has sat in judgment on thousands of cases.

A native of Renton, Justice Madsen received her undergraduate degree from the University of Washington in 1974 and earned her Juris Doctor from Gonzaga University School of Law in 1977. After completing law school, she worked as a public defender and then joined the Seattle City Attorney’s office where she was appointed Special Prosecutor. In 1988, Justice Madsen was appointed to the Seattle Municipal Court.

A commitment to public service and equal justice rooted early in Justice Madsen’s legal career journey. While a Gonzaga student, she volunteered many hours with the university’s Legal Assistance Clinic and with Spokane Legal Services. During her career, she developed the child abuse component of the Family Violence Project and worked to comprehensively address violence in the family through the Domestic Violence Coordinating Committee, which she founded. Justice Madsen has increased opportunities for women and attorneys of color to receive appointments as pro tem judges. She has also encouraged and increased diversity among the court employee population. Today, she currently chairs the Washington State Gender and Justice Commission, which works to eliminate gender bias in the legal profession and within the law and justice system. This Commission partnered with other community groups to successfully pass legislation banning the shackling of pregnant women prisoners during labor. Since 2005, Justice Madsen has led efforts to establish the Initiative for Diversity, a program encouraging legal employers to commit to and implement plans to increase diversity.

Regarded by her Supreme Court colleagues as having empathy, compassion, and the heart for the spirit of the law, Justice Madsen has worked to help judges better understand and respect the people who come through their courts. She says, “At the end of the day, it’s a person’s life.”

Gonzaga University is proud to hold up the model of this jurist as one deeply committed to justice and social equality and known for her exceptional work ethic. We are pleased to bestow upon Chief Justice Barbara Madsen the Gonzaga Law Medal.