

The Declaration of Independence:

A North Star for Every Generation

The Declaration articulated an ideal that has challenged this country, generation after generation, to do better – to strive toward a more perfect union. That is part of its power, and lawyers have always been central to that work.

BY CHIEF JUSTICE JILL J. KAROFSKY

In the Wisconsin Supreme Court hearing room, four large paintings decorate the walls, depicting the foundation of law in the State of Wisconsin: Roman civil law, the Magna Carta, the U.S. Constitution, and Wisconsin tribal and territorial law. The paintings are magnificent. And across all four, there are more than 80 men and zero women.

That absence says a lot. It tells us that since the beginning of human history, an entire group of people was dismissed, disregarded, and ignored. For far too long, women were denied legal rights and not trusted with the power to vote or hold office. In short, they were left out of the story. But of course, women were always part of the story. So were Black Americans, Native people, Latino and Asian immigrants, people with disabilities, LGBTQ Americans, and many others who had to fight to be included in the promise of 1776.

The Declaration of Independence was an aspirational document. It made a bold claim that “all men are created equal.”

The Declaration did not make equality real. It did not end slavery, give women the right to vote, or guarantee every person liberty or the pursuit of happiness. But the Declaration articulated an ideal that has challenged this country, generation after generation, to do better. To strive toward a more perfect union.

That is part of its power.

Again and again, Americans who were excluded from the full promise of those words have demanded that the country honor their

rights, liberties, and freedoms. That is how we have moved forward. Not perfectly. Not quickly enough – but forward.

Lawyers have always been central to that work. We do not just admire the Declaration. We help give meaning to its promises. We defend rights. We challenge abuses of power. We hold the government accountable to the people. We adhere to the rule of law. And we help make real the idea that no person is above the law and no person is beneath its protection. To do this work, our courts must be places where people can seek justice without fear, and where decisions are grounded in law, not politics, pressure, or threats.

That work matters because rights do not protect themselves. Liberty does not secure itself. Equality does not enforce itself. The pursuit of happiness means very little if the courthouse doors are open to some and closed to others.

Today, six of the seven justices on the Wisconsin Supreme Court are women. That does not erase the past. But it does show that institutions can change when people keep pushing them toward their own highest ideals.

The Declaration is not a relic. It is a North Star. It points us toward a country that has never fully existed, but that generations of Americans have refused to stop building.

That work is still ours. And the promise is still worth it. **WL**



Chief Justice Jill J. Karofsky, U.W. 1992, has served on the Wisconsin Supreme Court since 2020 and as chief justice since July 1, 2025. Access the digital archive at www.wisbar.org/wl.