

Presentation of Karen Thorson Awards to Lee Ann Barnhardt and William Brunson

On August 29, 2023, at its annual conference in Columbus, Ohio, NASJE President Joy Lyngar will present NASJE's highest honor to Lee Ann Barnhardt (ND) and William Brunson (NV).

The Karen Thorson Award was established in 2012 to recognize a career judicial educator who has made a significant contribution to both NASJE and judicial branch education. In order to be nominated, the individual must: be a current or former member of NASJE; have had a significant positive impact on NASJE; and, have had a significant positive impact on judicial branch education.

The first recipient is Lee Ann Barnhardt who was nominated by her colleague, Bryan Pecht, at the North Dakota Supreme Court. Letters of support were provided by the state court administrator of North Dakota, Sally Holewa, North Dakota Supreme Court Justice Daniel Crothers, and NASJE past-president Dr. Tony Simones. Highlights from the nomination packet describe her accomplishments at the local, state and national level. Ms. Barnhardt has been the Director of Education and Communication for the North Dakota Supreme Court since 2005. During her almost twenty years in the position, she undertook the process to become a Certified Court Executive and Institute for Court Management Fellow. Ms. Barnhardt has spearheaded the effort for education not only in the courts, but also by providing outreach statewide in North Dakota by hosting the North Dakota Justices Teaching Institute for educators for more than a decade. Thousands of students have a better understanding of the court system thanks to more informed teachers. Ms. Barnhardt also serves as the state coordinator of the North Dakota We The People Program, and has previously served on the board of directors of the State Chapter of the Children's Advocacy Centers of North Dakota and the Bismarck Public Schools Foundation.

Her significant contributions to NASJE include serving as its President from 2017 - 2018. She is also past Midwest Regional Director, past co-chair of the Annual Conference Committee, past chair of the Membership and Mentor Committee, and past chair of NASJE's strategic plan committee. Ms. Barnhardt also regularly serves as faculty for the conference and as a mentor to new members. In addition to her direct work for NASJE, she has represented NASJE in the revision of the ICM Fellowship curriculum and program design, served on the CCJ/COSCA National Opioid Task Force, and represented the organization at the most recent International Organization for Judicial Training conference.

The state court administrator, Sally Holewa wrote, "She inherited an educational program that had rigidly scheduled dates and formats but no learning objectives, no dedicated staff and very little respect. She immediately went to work to transform the quality, delivery methods and number of educational opportunities available for both judicial officers and court staff." Justice Crothers wrote, "Ms. Barnhardt joined the North Dakota Supreme Court staff in 2005 as our first judicial education coordinator. Due to her excellent job performance, the position was reclassified as the Director of Judicial Education and an additional person was hired to implement her many innovations and progressive ideas for education and outreach."

Tony Simones spoke of Ms. Barnhardt's impact on his career: "I have known Lee Ann for over a dozen years, since I left the university setting and took a position as Manager of Judicial Education at the Missouri Office of State Courts Administrator. She was an essential part of my success, as she has been an essential part of the success for so many people. Lee Ann taught us judicial education. I can remember so many Friday afternoons when she would give me hours of her time, helping me to learn the fundamentals of adult education and its application to the intricacies of the working of the courts.

She possesses so much knowledge about judicial education and has passed that knowledge on, thus ensuring that judicial education continues to be the vital and dynamic field it has become.”

The second recipient is William Brunson. Mr. Brunson was nominated by Marty Sullivan, current state court administrator for Arkansas and past-President of NASJE. Letters of support were sent by three NASJE past-presidents: Janice Calvi-Ruimerman, Professor Kelly Tait, and Caroline Kirkpatrick. Three other NASJE members also wrote letters: Michael Roosevelt, Crystal Banks, and Cyrana Mott. Emails concurring with the nomination were sent by several other NASJE members.

Highlights from the nomination packet outline the impact that Mr. Brunson has had on judicial educators around the country. Marty Sullivan wrote, “I believe hundreds of current and former state judicial educators around the country would join me in stating that through his more than thirty years of service to the National Judicial College, no single individual has impacted all 50 state judicial branch education programs more than William Brunson....”

Mr. Brunson worked at the National Judicial College for more than 30 years. He served as Director of Special Projects for the past eighteen years. He has conducted faculty development workshops in states too numerous to count. He has planned and managed international programs supporting judiciaries and the rule of law globally. He has overseen millions of dollars in grant projects that provided thousands of hours of high-quality education for judges across the nation. Prior to this position, Mr. Brunson served as the College’s Academic Director for more than three years, Assistant Academic Director for more than four years and has been published in many scholarly journals.

A dedicated leader within NASJE, Mr. Brunson is a past board member and past president, serving in that capacity in 2004-2005. During his tenure as president, Mr. Brunson oversaw the first online curriculum builder and recommended the creation of the Core Competencies for Judicial Branch Education. He was presented with the NASJE President’s Special Service Award in 1999 and has decades of service on many other NASJE committees, the International Committee and the Fundraising Committee, among others. He has written numerous articles for NASJE News.

Crystal Banks wrote, “Working in Washington, DC, we see hundreds of international delegations each year and it is a pleasure to discuss and share the differences and similarities with judicial systems all over the world. William has devoted significant time in that area and is a noted expert. I’ve called upon him many times for advice or counsel.”

Janice Calvi-Ruimerman wrote, “On a personal note, William was the first person I met at conference in 2010.... Thereafter, at every conference, at every event, at every meeting and networking opportunity, William remained, the first to acknowledge and welcome others. William genuinely cares about people; he listens non-judgmentally and is open and inclusive. These to me, are the character traits necessary for the development and sustainability of the future of our organization.”

Kelly Tait wrote, “In addition to being a stellar manager, program planner, mentor, and teacher, William has a sense of humor and good-natured approach that truly make him a goodwill ambassador for our profession and our organization.” Marty Sullivan concluded his nomination letter by saying, “It is truly difficult to think of a single individual with as wide an influence as William Brunson. His friendship and mentorship have been invaluable to my own personal career success.”