

University of Virginia School of Law
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Oral History Interview Transcript
Cover Sheet

Narrator: Manal Cheema

Interviewers: Sujaya Rajguru, Addie Patrick, Randi Flaherty

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Project Title: Virginia Law Women 50

Project Abstract: The Virginia Law Women 50 oral history project is part of the VLW 50th anniversary. The oral history project focus was on interviewing VLW leadership, and includes interviews with VLW past presidents from the 1970s through 2020.

Interview Abstract: Oral history interview of Manal Cheema, class of 2020, via Zoom, on February 7, 2022. Cheema discussed issues and challenges regarding diversity within Virginia Law Women (VLW). Cheema also discussed VLW programs and activities supporting women Law students' education and career interests, as well as VLW administration issues.

Beginning of interview

Addie Patrick: All right, hello everyone. Today is February 7, 2022. My name is Addie Patrick. I'm Zooming in from Charlottesville [Virginia]. I'm the library coordinator here at the UVA [University of Virginia Arthur J. Morris] Law Library, and we're here doing an oral history interview for the Virginia Law Women fiftieth anniversary program. So we're going to go around and introduce ourselves. Randi, if you'd like to go first.

Randi Flaherty: Hi, I'm Randi Flaherty. I'm Head of Special Collections at the UVA Law Library, and I am Zooming in from the Law Library in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Sujaya Rajguru: I'm Sujaya Rajguru. And I'm a 3L [at the UVA School of Law], and I'm Zooming in from Charlottesville, Virginia.

Manal Cheema: Hi, my name is Manal Cheema. I am currently with the U.S. Navy JAG [Judge Advocate General] Corps. I graduated from UVA [Law School] in 2020. And I'm Zooming in from Newport, Rhode Island.

Addie Patrick: Awesome. So I'm going to ask the first question, starting with Manal. Why did you decide to join Virginia Law Women?

Manal Cheema: So I decided to join in my 1L year, at least in an informal capacity, because I was really inspired by the organization. I saw that it had a lot of promise for women. And I actually was very impressed by a few of the women on the board, who I later befriended. So I kind of got roped in that way. And it wasn't until my 2L that I actually became extremely involved, serving as the vice president of the organization.

Sujaya Rajguru: Well since you mentioned vice president, why did you decide to run for the board initially?

Manal Cheema: So my mentor, slash friend, slash upperclassman, Kendall Burchard is the one who—she asked me to get coffee with her. And I was—it was my 1L spring semester. I was very nervous about law school still at that point. I wasn't sure about my role, I didn't have a strong community yet. And Kendall sat me down in Scott Commons and she said, "Hey, I've seen how you've approached law school. I've seen how your peers speak about you. And I've seen the way that you interact, and I feel like you would be really good for vice president." And I was like, "Whoa, Kendall, where is this coming from? I don't see myself in that way at all." And she's like, "Well, I wish you would see yourself in the way that I see and your peers see you, and I think being in a position of leadership would be able to give you more of that confidence to go forth. And also to be there for your colleagues and women in the legal profession." She had seen how important empowering women has been for me since college—in college and in high school with the activities that I did. So she encouraged me to run. And my peer advisor, Dasher Pascoe, who was the president of VLW [Virginia Law Women] at the time, also jumped on that and inspired me to run. And then I put my name in the hat. And then I started hearing about all these other fantastic women who I look up to in my class running and I was very nervous about it. And then I also heard some unfortunate comments about how VLW historically hasn't had women of color in leadership positions. And one of my classmates, who was a bit more jaded by the representation of

VLW, had mentioned to me that I shouldn't really expect getting elected. That it was good that I was running, but to keep my expectations low because it was a white women's organization. And I would be better suited to—that's why Women of Color was created, according to my peer. So I got kind of nervous. And I remember messaging Dasher in the middle of the night and asking her, "Hey, I'm not so sure I want to run anymore. Can you take my name out of the hat?" And she said, "Absolutely not. I want to know where this is coming from." So I told her and she's like, "That's not a good reason. Because that's why so many women don't run for things because, not because they don't feel like they can do it, but because they're—they think that other people don't think that they can." And I saw that she was correct, kept my name in and I was—probably the best moment of my 1L when I found out that I was elected, because then it meant that I was joining a wonderful organization, that I was defying expectations, but that I was also in a position to make change. And also show people, or law school that VLW can—really does represent so many women here.

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes, I think coming in as a 1L, I could definitely see that with your leadership in the organization. [laughs]

Manal Cheema: Thank you. [laughs]

Sujaya Rajguru: Okay, so you talked about how being a woman of color played into the race for vice president. How do you think—what was your experience, as a woman of color, being a leader in the organization, working with your board and the membership as it became more diverse?

Manal Cheema: I think it was fantastic. I didn't see—there was no, there was no problems. You know, those traditional problems. I think a lot of women saw what, how undiverse VLW was. And the people who ran with me made the organization more diverse. And we also really pushed for having diversity in our—even diversity in the next classes too. Kendall was all about it. She wanted to do diversity workshops, she introduced diversity, the clerk—women in clerkships panel. She and I worked together to reformat our entire election structure for it to be more amenable to diverse outcomes. The issue in my 1L, for example, was that the way that we did our 1L elections was by, in our first general body meeting, we would have people raise their hands. And at that minute they were running. And in that same meeting, it would be a vote by voice on—or like counting. It was, it was a vote by counting, but it was in the same room with everyone sitting, immediate decisions. So in those circumstances, it takes a lot of bravery to run. And unfortunately, I think that situation did lead to undiverse outcomes. I remember sitting there as a 1L, being like, "Why isn't a woman of color raising her hand?" Not that the people who didn't get those positions weren't fantastic, they were fantastic and they were my friends, but there was different—you know, UVA is full of fantastic people, generally, so it's not bad to want more diverse outcomes, at least in some respects. So, Kendall and I looked at that. And we moved our elections online. We added a waiting—a period for people to consider votes for a week, we added statements that were written up rather than a fifteen-second stump speech. People could submit photographs if they wanted, be associated people, let people campaign for themselves. And I think as a number—as the board composition shows today, it's quite diverse. And when I was president, that was really—oh, when I was president, and when Kendall was president, we adopted co-sponsorship factors too, and made sure

that the sponsorship team was full of diverse members from our own executive board. I wanted—one of my co-sponsorship team was someone who was on part of [The] Federal Society, someone who's part of American Constitution Society, FLF [Feminist Legal Forum] and Women of Color and that is like who—that is how we really prioritize diversity in our thing. And I think it was incremental change. Dasher started moving the stick forward. And then Kendall moved it, and I moved it, then Sujaya moved it. And I think it's been really incredible. I've just been constantly impressed by how innovative people are. I'm still on the emails, and it's really nice to see how VLW is constantly evolving.

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes. Okay, a few things you touched on. First, just to clarify—so the change in elections. Was that just for the 1L rep positions?

Manal Cheema: I think we did—in my year, well, in Kendall's year, we changed the way that the exec-board elections worked. So 1L reps happened in Kendall's year, and exec-board elections. And then I changed exec-board elections just a bit more to make it more of on a PowerPoint slide that had like longer blurbs available. So we've tweaked around, tweaked it a couple of times until we finalized a product and I think they work substantially the same now. I'm not sure? Okay.

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes. I pretty much use the same formats for everything. Yes. Okay. Awesome. And could you also elaborate on the co-sponsorship factors?

Manal Cheema: Yes. So this is something that Kendall and I discussed. And this is the constant battle with VLW, which is whether or not it is a political organization or takes stances on political issues. And it's a dance between VLW, Women of Color and FLF. And about who—not having the same goals as organizations, but also all of—we have a lot of overlap between members. So sometimes we have—there's a push every year that VLW takes a stance on hot topic issues like abortion or hot topic issues like the Israeli-Palestine conflict, things like that. And every year at the beginning, this is something I instituted in my—when I was president. I—the board should vote on whether or not —what its mission statement is at the beginning of the year. And I'm not sure if it's continued, but it's—my intention with that was to have the board affirmatively decide if it was going to be apolitical or not. And my year, the board decided to remain apolitical. And what that meant was that with these co—we adopted these co-sponsorship factors, which are basically a list of questions we go through and try to figure out like, What is the program trying to do? Is a program take—is its primary purpose focused on advancing women in the legal profession? Or is it advancing a political cause? Are there women on the panel or in the presentation? Are they involved substantially with this? [laughs] I think one of the factors was would this unduly agitate the VLW population? And questions like that, a classic, legal, totality of the circumstances test. And so whenever we got a co-sponsorship request, or a funding requests from another organization, or even an advertisement request, we would send that to the co-sponsorship committee, which was comprised of me, the vice president, and then the other members, and we would discuss these, what—the factor analysis, apply whatever information we got about the event, to the factor analysis. Sometimes we'd send questions back to the group asking us to sponsor their event—be like, "Would you be amenable working with ACS [American Constitution Society], like, could you get them to sponsor this? Because then it's less political—it has less of an

appearance, of politicalness to us." Or if we sponsored this event with FedSoc [The Federalist Society], Can we, are we for sure, sponsoring a similar event with ACS in the future? And once we made a decision on that, we would jump it back to the main board and let them know what we decided and have the board vote generally, if they agreed with us or not, and then move from there.

Manal Cheema: But it was a it was a way to standardize a process because in the—when I was a 1L, VLW was constantly accused of having political views even though it pretended to be apolitical. So that's what we were trying to get away from. Now, what is political and what isn't political is also a question and a huge debate. And that was something that we definitely got into. So it was, it was tough. It's a tough stance to take. I think it's one of the hardest things to do as a VLW president is to manage that. And just because that's more of your responsibility, the appearance of VLW. And I think different presidencies, different boards have handled it differently. And there are consequences for that. A very valid consequence, a very valid criticism I got from my peers was we weren't taking stances on issues that affect women, because we deemed them political. And my response to that was like, "Yes, that's right. And I wish we could, but you know, what, I personally am very in favor of X organization's views, and I will go to that organization, but I just can only do it in a personal capacity. I'm not going to do it on behalf of VLW because I want it to have very, you know, conservative members feel represented, very liberal members feel represented in the same organization."

Sujaya Rajguru: Thank you. Yes, I would agree that that's probably the most difficult thing for a VLW president to deal with, as you know. [laughs]

Manal Cheema: We had plenty of calls about that. [laughter]

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes. Okay, so you were talking a bit about Feminist Legal Form and Women of Color. And I think VLW's relationship with those organizations has varied over the years from my limited understanding. So what was that working relationship like when you were vice president and president?

Manal Cheema: I would say it was good. I would say again, I had—I'm personally a member, was a member of Women of Color. And my vice president Nicole Banton was on the board for Women of Color. Nikki Wolfrey, one of the members of our board, she was president of FLF. We had a ton of overlap. So we had a very good relationship. And I think Nikki and Nicole really understood the distinction we were trying to draw. We were trying to silo VLW into this category for events and overlap. So there was almost a practical and administrative advantage to that, that we all saw. But I think it was a good thing because we—having those individuals on the board made our planning a lot more comprehensive, because we saw, we had a healthy debate. And we saw what VL—we were very intentional about our events, because we knew the alternatives. We knew what FLF was planning and Women of Color was planning, and we knew how to maximize our collaborations with them. So inside baseball, if you will, it was pretty nice to have them. [laughs]

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes, we have one member who's also on Women of Color's board this year. And yes, it definitely streamlines collaborations and programming.

Manal Cheema: Yes.

Sujaya Rajguru: Okay, so you also mentioned the diversity in clerkships panel, which we still do, and it was a very successful event this year, as you know. Manal is one of our panelists. [laughter] So could you talk a little bit more about that event, and maybe other programming that you used to help draw in a more diverse audience for VLW and more diverse speakers?

Manal Cheema: Yes, so that event, Kendall started that one. And it was really good. I think we've been pushing— before it was women in clerkships, and then we pushed it more to diversity, making sure we had women of color on the panel too. So I think that was really helpful. I think those panels are really helpful to the extent that panelists are very candid about the realities of clerking as women, or clerking as a woman of color. If you have folks who are just giving the canned speech, then it's more difficult. So securing confidentiality, or letting the panelists know that this is recorded or not recorded or, "Here are certain questions that we're going to ask and we're not going to disclose them." I think that's that was really important for us. Because for better or worse, there are still some topics that are hard to discuss openly, with wider audiences. I think COVID has made things a little bit more difficult, because as a panelist, you don't always know who's in the room, whereas you knew that when you were in person. Another thing that we tried doing was intersectionality stuff. So we always tried to make sure that we had intersectional panelists, but we also wanted—we were going to do a panel on the summer, sorry, in the spring about it. But unfortunately, with COVID, that kind of got sidetracked. But I think it was more of a holistic approach that I was looking for. Just making sure that we were intentional, just as we were putting other organizations through the gauntlet of our co-sponsorship factors of whether or not there was a woman on the panel, we were investigating our own panels and making sure that we also had women of color, we had queer women, women of different backgrounds on our events. Holding ourselves accountable to the standards we were imposing on other student groups.

Sujaya Rajguru: Great. What other—can you talk a little bit more. Sorry, think there might be an echo. Okay. Could you talk a little bit more about other programming VLW did during your presidency more generally, and resources that VLW provided to members?

Manal Cheema: Well, we changed the email a lot to provide more resources, like the outline bank and links to helpful sites. So we've revamped the website to give more resources. Guides to outlining and things like that, because we wanted to have more of an academic focus, so we reorganized our outline bank, too. I think that's one of the bigger perks. That's a perk that draws most people to VLW is the outline bank, and then we bring them to our events. We have a lot of our flagship, or cornerstone, events. So Women in Public Service, Women in Big Law. And that was another really interesting—to negotiate the timing of that to make sure each one gives has equal importance. So the way, just to explain that briefly: Women in Big Law funds Women in Public Service, and it's a big—it's a huge priority of us to make sure both are as big events, because we don't want to diminish the other. Women in Big Law is easier, it's much cheaper, it's easier to get people, make it a bigger event because firms bring all this swag and they bring themselves and it just, it plans itself. It does not plan itself, it takes a lot of work.

But it takes—it's easier to make it seem like a bigger deal than Women in Public Service, which is completely contingent on the funding of Women in Big Law. So that was a big priority for me since I was—I think that was another reputation VLW had, was an organization that's purely for women who want to go into private practice, that we added events like women in mergers and acquisitions, because we're looking at the places where women are less represented in private practice. But, I think we pushed more for public service. And I think that came from me being a president, at the time, who was guaranteed to go into public service, because historically most of the board is women who go into private practice. And you know, that changed because Sujaya also is going into public service. So, I think VLW has been in this really cool swing of every what—we've had three women of color presidents in a row since me? Yes, it's pretty awesome. But it's—I can't remember all of the events. I think we did a lot, I think we—yes, I can't remember the rest of them. It's been a while.

Sujaya Rajguru: Addie, Randi did want to ask about any particular events that came up and other interviews?

Randi Flaherty: I was curious about the role of the constitution in the organization. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Manal Cheema: Yes. So every year, or, I would say, for us, it was always around winter time that we would revise the constitution and the bylaws. So in my year, we added a couple positions to the constitution and bylaws—we added. And I think for us, it's actually really important. We adhere to it, and I referenced it a lot when I was going through my events. And it was the same thing—when I said that we voted on our mission statement, that was in a direct amendment into our constitution and bylaws. I think we—the voting structure also, we changed that. Any big—how we ran elections, we put that into the constitution and bylaws. Because for us that was the most clear way of ensuring that perhaps the next board will follow what we want. So, as a way of control. A way of making us accountable to our desires, but also hopefully incentivizing the next board to do that as well. Now, it's not difficult to change the constitution and bylaws, considering we did it almost every other semester. But it was—you had to have most of the board vote on it anyways. So the way I did it is that I would propose changes, then I would send it out to the board for comments. And then at our next exec-board meeting, which would be a month later, we would vote on it, and have a debate about what it meant for our organization. I think we added, yes, we added quite a few positions in my year, just to make things responsive to the needs that we realized in our fall semester.

Sujaya Rajguru: Was the LL.M. [Master of Laws] representative, one of the ones you added?

Manal Cheema: Yes, yes, it was. Because we wanted more representation. And I think it was a huge oversight on us not to have an LL.M. representative for that long.

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes, I think we just had our first one this year, so.

Manal Cheema: Yay that's awesome. [laughs]

Sujaya Rajguru: We finally have one. Yes, yes. Let's see. Seeing what else we wanted to cover We talked about—we've already talked—we've covered a lot of ground so far. Oh, how involved were faculty in VLW?

Manal Cheema: Yes. So this was another interesting thing. So the-how involved the faculty are, are almost completely dependent, at least in my experience, on the relationship board members had with the faculty. Julia Mahoney, Professor Julia Mahoney, is technically the faculty advisor of VLW. But it wasn't until I had coffee with her when I started. That wasn't true for my predecessors, for various reasons. I think it was just hard scheduling. And it's not-VLW is a very independent organization. So we never really have to rely too much on faculty, except for the faculty dinner series, and then a couple other, the wine and cheese night. But those were, we never—we don't have a close relationship with faculty in terms of planning the intricacies of our events. We were more like, "Here's our event, faculty can you come?" And there are pros and cons to that. Cons is that it may not be responsive or reflective of what the faculty wants a relationship to be. And you know, we may have been making unreasonable demands on the faculty or expectations. But I went-during my presidency, we had the wine and cheese night and we did the classic faculty dinner series, where we would go ask faculty—the board members would, each of us would asked a couple of faculty members that we were close with and kind of be like, "Hey, would you like to do this dinner?" And that was good. And that was probably the extent of our relationship. So it was part of why I wanted to do the SpeakUp project and interview faculty members. We were able to get a lot of good data from the fifty or so interviews we did, about how faculty viewed VLW and, you know, the dinner series and women in the Law School. And I think, you know, from my own personal conversations with them, I think women have been doing extremely well in the Law School. They have been crushing it, scoring top scores. They run most of the organizations. But something we've also realized a lot is that women, just like women students and women faculty members, get so much of the responsibility to lead those organizations, to plan all those extracurriculars, to carry all that weight on top of their schoolwork and still be demanded to be perfect. And I think that's the issue that we're facing, we face—we're dealing with right now is woman are expected to do it all. And, I think, you know, my male colleagues and the male professors are doing well, but I don't think they go out and run organizations at the same level that women do or, you know, plan, these events or ask—be asked to do the emotional labor that women do. So I think we relied a lot on female faculty, but our board was very cognizant of that dilemma. It's like, Oh, we want our faculty, the women faculty to be more involved in our organization. But then we're just doing—we're further perpetuating the problem of making demands on their time when they have so little free time. So it was more of a—We want them to be involved, but we don't want them to be overburdened. And that was another difficulty, a catch-twenty-two, if you will.

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes, definitely. Well, you mentioned the SpeakUp project. So could you talk a little bit about what that is? And what motivated you to start it?

Manal Cheema: Yes. So I mean, it's still ongoing, I think we're still working on the data analysis, it's kind of—it's again, one of those things, you're asking a lot of dedicated people to take even more time out of their day to run this qualitative-quantitative research project. But I viewed it as my project when I was vice president. So that was

the thing that I started. And I worked with women from the University of Chicago Law School who had done a project at their school. I went through all of their documents with them and had multiple conversations, to see how we could implement it at our school. And the purpose of the project is just—was to assess the environment and relationships of women at our law school. They had done a similar project at Harvard and Yale, and then to U. Chicago, so we emulated the U. Chicago ones because that was the most robust. And went through the IRB, Institutional Review Board process. And it was a, three parts to that. The first part was faculty interviews. So asking each faculty like a set of questions and trying to glean how their experiences are like, as faculty members, and their experiences with students. And there was two surveys, an academic survey and a social survey, sent out to the student population. And then we also collected data from publicly available information on awards and things like that. And now we're trying to put all that data together and try to see what it means. But it was really cool to kind of get that assessment and take that temperature check of how things are. And I think going back to my earlier conversation—comments about how women take on so much of that burden—I think that was what I saw. Nothing's published, but I think that's what I've seen, saw most in my law school. It wasn't that women aren't excelling. It's just women are asked to excel almost unreasonably well.

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes. It's quite a lot of data that you all collected, it's quite a beast. [laughter] Okay, kind of going off of that. We talked about your relationship with the faculty and I know with SpeakUp, you had to talk to the administration. So I would say, generally, what was VLW's and your relationship with the [Law School] administration, including Dean [Risa] Goluboff, Student Affairs, all of them?

Manal Cheema: Yes, you know, Student Affairs, fantastic. Kate Duvall [former Director of Student Affairs at the UVA School of Law] was—we didn't work with her too much, but she was wonderful, always so supportive of student organizations and VLW. We involved Dean Goluboff and Vice Dean [Leslie] Kendrick early on in the data collection and early on, in most things VLW did. And, you know, they took a lot of good interest in it, they were excited about the project. We worked very closely with Professor [Molly] Shadle, Professor [Anne] Coughlin and Professor [J.H.Rip] Verkerke. They were our biggest advocates and, you know, they helped us— connected us with a psychology professor, Professor [Sophie] Trawalter [Associate Professor of Public Policy and Psychology, UVA Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy]. And that was really good to work with them. Dean Goluboff and Vice Dean Kendrick have, you know, they have their personal preference, their, you know, their personal attitudes about stuff and then administrative attitudes about that stuff. And I think you can imagine that institutions are sensitive about surveys and things like that. And so they were naturally sensitive about some things. And we did our best to address those without compromising anything, any of our goals in the surveys. I think that showed in the professor interviews too. And it shows with what I was saying earlier, about the diversity and clerkships panel. When you're commenting on your employment, you might want to say—you might have other things, there might be other things you want to say that you may not say, or other things that you might have to say that you may not necessarily agree with. So I think that's all I will say on that.

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes, I think that says it all. [laughter] Okay going back just briefly to something we discussed earlier. We talked about adding positions to the board and I asked if you added the LL.M. rep. position. How else did you change the composition of the board?

Manal Cheema: Can you—in terms of adding more people?

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes. Were there any other positions you added? Or maybe role shifting that you did?

Manal Cheema: Yes, so we added another professional development chair to the organization. And that was in response to—we were asking a lot of the—well, so events co-chairs, we changed that. We were asking a lot of the professional development chairs, so we added another to plan more ad hoc events throughout the year, so that one person would be solely in charge of Women in Public Service and one person would be solely in charge of Women in Big Law. I need to pull up this [looks at her computer screen]. I want to pull up the constitution, just give me one second. Let's see. Okay. Sorry I have so many files open.

Sujaya Rajguru: I totally get you. That may have been an overly specific question, I apologize.

Manal Cheema: No, you're good. I mean, we have the community outreach chair, the scholarship chair, mentorship co-chairs. We've renamed a couple of the positions to be more responsive. Yes, then the professional programs chairs. That used to be the event chairs, but then we renamed those, to have three of them. Then we also had the—and the professional development co-chairs are separate from the event co-chairs. My apologies. And then, the members at-large, I think we also changed what they did, too, to have them more, to make it more clear what their responsibility is. So before the mentors at-large were expected to have, to plan substantive events. But then we recognized the need to have institutional knowledge. So then we had—we changed their description to be more like, You're 3Ls who merely exist on the board to provide your feedback about how it was, how your VLW experiences were. Because we understood that a lot of the 3Ls didn't have the wherewithal and capacity to plan events. But we wanted them to stay on the board, at least in an informal capacity, to give that advice, and pitch in. And this was especially important for the professional programs, co-chairs, and the event co-chairs and planning their events. I think the vice president, that was something also that we developed more to be like, Your job is to shadow the vice president, but also have a flagship event that you work on. And to make sure that you understand how the organization works for the transition. Another thing we had that I instituted was, at the end of each semester, we would have—at the beginning, and end of each semester, we would have—each of the board members would answer surveys about how I was doing as president, and how they were doing in their positions and what they wanted to improve on. And that was really helpful for me to see what they wanted to do in the beginning of the semester, see what actually happened, so that in the spring semester, you could change it. And that's actually how I changed the professional programs co-chairs around, because one of the surveys demonstrated to me that there was an imbalance in how much people were planning or responsible for. So we changed that around and I was able to move a bunch of responsibilities around

to alleviate the pressure on some of the members of the board. And it also made me realize, Oh, I was lacking in some communication stuff. So I was able to change that too. Yes, professional development surveys. Fun stuff.

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes. A good survey. Okay, let's see. I was going kind of get to your reflections. Addie and Randi, I don't know if you wanted to—if you had some more things you want to talk about on the topics we've discussed so far?

Addie Patrick: I had a question, just jumping back to programming really fast. I know we talked a lot about sort of these lecture type of, and panel type of programs: Women in Big Law, women in clerkships. I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit more about some of the social programming. So the wine and cheese night and the faculty dinner series. I know, wine and cheese is sort of, it seems to be looking from the outside looking in a staple of, you know, the Virginia Law Women programming. Can you talk a little bit more about the importance of that event? And sort of what conversations are happening during that?

Manal Cheema: Yes, so the wine and cheese night is often the first interaction that the student body has with VLW, and with the faculty respectively. So it happens very early on in the semester. And what I mean with faculty is a wider set. But I remember when I was a 1L, it was one of those first events that I went to where I was like, Oh, this is what it feels like to be a lawyer. I personally don't drink, so I was always like, We need to have non-alcoholic options here. But I was walking around with—you're nursing your beverage, chatting with professors after class, and meeting new classmates. And so it's an introductory event that's really good to foster and set the tone off for the year. So it was really important for us as a first freshman. And to also introduce students to faculty members they may not necessarily meet outside of their 1L classes. And I think the conversations are the standard networking conversations that would happen. People would be like, "Oh, Professor." They would kind of look around the room see who kind of maybe looks like a professor. Maybe sometimes make the mistake of mistaking your professor for a student. Not that that happens frequently. But it happens a lot. [laughs] Those conversations would be like, people are—students are learning how to talk to professors outside of the classroom. So that was really important for us. Then the faculty dinner series are a way to talk to a professor more informally, more of a colleague. A relationship that they might have, like a mentor-mentee relationship, that they might have during law school or after law school. So my first faculty dinner series that I went to was with Professor Ashley Deeks, and she's been a great mentor to me. And it was really cool to sit with her at a restaurant in downtown Charlottesville, and just chat and have a great time, and also meet some of the other women in VLW in that informal capacity that I wasn't necessarily hanging out with, but certainly did hang out with afterwards. I think it also couples in with our professional development week, plans that we did. So we had wellness Wednesdays, that we had, and we worked with Kate [Duvall] on that. And we had the clothing swap and headshots. And we had Palentines day, which is something I started. It was where we would, it was like another wine—it was a wine and chocolate night, plus non-alcoholic beverages. And we would celebrate just hanging out with our classmates in an informal capacity as part of Feb Club. Perhaps one of the more classier events of Feb Club, but an event nonetheless. And that was really fun for us too. So I think we—our programming really oscillates from

more formal mentor-mentee relationships, social interactions, to very informal social interactions. Just to give people different social opportunities to interact with people. Someone might do very well at the wine and cheese gathering with professors and not really care for a faculty dinner, just because it's a longer interaction or whatnot. So we tried to have a bunch of different social interactions with different flavors to them to accommodate our population.

Sujaya Rajguru: Palentine's Day is happening this Thursday.

Manal Cheema: Is it? Oh my gosh, that makes me so happy.

Sujaya Rajguru: The wine has been bought. The snacks have been bought. [laughs]

Manal Cheema: Yes, yes. That's probably my best contribution to VLW.

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes. The description for the event, by the way, is a Leslie Knope quote, which I have—

Manal Cheema: As it should be, yes.

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes, what else would it be? [laughs]

Manal Cheema: Of course. It's a planned Galentine's Day. That was another thing that we added, the male allyship listerv. I don't know if that's still a thing. But we tried to be more intentional and, during my presidency, to involve men in the organization, as allies to women in the legal profession. Because we realize that so often, what holds back with the advancement of women law firms is how their male counterparts interact. If their male counterparts refuse to take paternity leave, for example. That is one of those things that can really hurt the progress of women. So that was something that we started looking—if we were educating our male peers about these issues. Sure, they may not see any issues during law school, but their choices in the field are what creates differences in the disparities between women. If we started teaching them now, or sharing articles or having those discussions with them now, perhaps we could offset the outcomes we so see often ten, fifteen years down the road.

Randi Flaherty: I want to jump to [computer feedback]—I'm getting some feedback. You're talking about VLW sort of situating itself within this environment of other student organizations, and I was wondering how you would describe VLWs mission? And what is the need that it was serving in your presidency for women students at the Law School?

Manal Cheema: Yes, so I would say Virginia Law Women's purpose is to advance women in the legal profession, professionally, socially and confidently. I know the third word doesn't follow the parallel structure. But, it's basically-it doesn't pay heed to what women necessarily want to do in the legal profession, if they want to go into public service or private service, if they want to champion certain causes or not. It's to bring women together. To help them recognize that we all should support each other support the advancement of women in the field and recognize that the administrative choices we make, or the moves we make for our career advancement, shouldn't come at the cost of

other women. And I think that's kind of what we were looking for. We wanted to enable women by giving them good headshots, making them dress for success, making sure they feel confident walking into a networking setting, that they have the social connections, they have the academic leg up with the outline bank. I feel like they are properly and confidently heading into the legal profession. The real world is very different than law school. Some things are sometimes strangely the same, like the prestige-chasing and everything. But I think the most important thing for VLW was just to make women feel confident entering in. Because there's so many things once we get out here that attack your confidence, where imposter syndrome sneaks in. And I think if VLW challenges women to fight that and feel like, No, you are worth it. You deserve to be in this legal profession. There is a place for you. And here are the resources for that.

Sujaya Rajguru: So as far as inspiring confidence in women. I know Manal as a mentor has been a really big role in helping me fight my imposter syndrome. So on that note, I would be curious—I guess I have some idea knowing you, but—could you tell us a little bit about the relationships you've built with other mentors—or other individuals in VLW? Friendships, mentorships, professional, casual.

Manal Cheema: Well, Sujaya is one of my besties. So that's one. Yes, I've been very close with the women that I've met through VLW. As I mentioned, Kendall is a constant mentor and friend and confidant. I've called her often about situations I've experienced at work, or, you know, imposter syndrome, or even just writing academic articles and things like that. And the same thing with Sujaya. We had a lot of calls this past year about similar topics. And other women who I've met through VLW. And I think one of the biggest things I learned from women in VLW, was paying it forward. And you know, always whatever goodwill was shown to you, and you should always pay it forward. And I think, so much goodwill, starting from how I got elected, the confidence that I needed to get elected, to you know, excelling in law school, or pursuing certain internships. Opportunities came from other women who would be just like, "You can do it, no, you got this, we're not going let you give up on yourself." And I have been in a constant effort to try to pay that kindness forward to other people and to mentor them and to just try to be—give them candid advice. But also be there for them and feel that, tell them that, "You too. Go forth and do great things. And I know you can do it, because you just have to make sure you don't give up on yourself." There are a lot of times where I almost gave up on myself in law school. I was like, I just don't know if I'm doing it right. I don't know if I'm biting off more than I could chew. And I—every time there was a woman who just sat me down and was like, "No, you got this. We're going to figure it out." And I think anything I accomplished in law school I had to thank for the women I met there.

Sujaya Rajguru: Yes, I don't know. That's hard to follow up. I guess, should we move to just seeing if there's anything else that we want to cover? Was there any other particular questions, Randi and Addie? [shake heads no] Okay, so I guess Manal, is there any other topics you wanted to discuss? Or any, anything at all?

Manal Cheema: No, I think I'm good. I wish I was a bit better prepared, but I think, now I'm just doubting myself again, there you go, cyclical. You have to fight it every day. [laughs] But no, I think I'm good.

Sujaya Rajguru: Okay, wonderful. And is there anyone else in particular you'd recommend we speak to for this project?

Manal Cheema: Kendall, for sure, if she's on the list. And then I think it would be, yes, just Kendall and Nicole Banton. And then I don't know if you're speaking on it, Sujaya, but you should, too. You had a very interesting year.

Sujaya Rajguru: I did have a very interesting year in a lot of ways. Yes. Yes, I do think I am on the list as well.

Manal Cheema: Good.

Sujaya Rajguru: I'll be switching roles. [laughter]

Manal Cheema: Yes. Awesome, well, thank you so much for letting me speak on this.

Sujaya Rajguru: Oh, thank you. I mean, this is a—I feel like I've had a lot of fun, full circle moments. Thinking back to what I saw you do and how you helped me, so this is like, another one of those.

Manal Cheema: Yes, well, you inspire me a lot, Sujaya. What was that word we use for people where it was like, They're star people and—

Sujaya Rajguru: Oh yes. That's very sweet.

Manal Cheema: Yes, you're a star person.

Sujaya Rajguru: Awe. [laughs]

Manal Cheema: Oh. Okay. Well thank you so much Randi and Addie. I'm really grateful that y'all are pursuing this.

Addie Patrick: Well thank you guys. I'm going to—let me just stop the recording here and then we can share farewells.

End of interview