

**Statement of Laura E. Wolk
Former Law Student of Judge Amy Coney Barrett**

**Hearing on the Nomination of the Honorable Amy Coney Barrett
To be an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States**

October 15, 2020

Mr. Chairman, Senator Feinstein and Members of the Committee:

My name is Laura Wolk, and I am a former student and mentee of Judge Amy Coney Barrett. In part because of her unwavering support, I am the first blind woman to serve as a law clerk on the Supreme Court of the United States. It is now my immense privilege to appear before you in support of Judge Barrett's nomination to that same great institution.

You have heard the past few days about Amy Coney Barrett's judicial qualities. Her analytical skills, commitment to the rule of law, and judicial humility cannot seriously be questioned. If these were the only characteristics that Judge Barrett possessed, she would remain the most highly qualified candidate for the position. But I am here to tell you that should you confirm Amy Barrett, the country will receive something far greater than simply an unparalleled legal mind. The Supreme Court—and therefore all Americans—will gain the service of one of the kindest individuals I have ever known. Her brilliance is matched only by her compassion, and her honesty is beyond reproach.

I do not speak in mere abstractions. Rather, I have experienced these characteristics firsthand, with life-changing results.

Because I am completely blind, I rely very heavily on assistive technology to compete on a level playing field with my sighted peers. I use it to access texts in digital format, to complete my work, and even to write and deliver remarks such as the ones I am giving today. Before arriving at Notre Dame Law School in 2013, I engaged in extensive talks to ensure that, in addition to my own personal assistive technology, the university would ALSO purchase copies in case something happened to my devices. But despite assurances to the contrary, I arrived on campus to find that bureaucratic glitches left me without access to that technology. And, almost as if on cue, my personal laptop immediately began to fail. Overnight, I found myself struggling to keep up in class, and I began to fall more and more behind with each passing hour. I needed help, and I needed it fast.

To my great fortune, I had been randomly assigned to Judge Barrett's civil procedure class as part of my first semester schedule. Though I had only known her for a few weeks, her rare combination of graciousness and warmth gave me hope that she could assist me in procuring the technology from Notre Dame as a stopgap measure until I could fix my own. Nevertheless, I entered her office with relatively low expectations. Based on past experience, I assumed that, in the best case scenario, Judge Barrett would direct me to the proper bureaucratic channels to solve my problem, which could still take weeks if not longer to navigate. In the worst case scenario, I would have to explain why my situation was so dire and why her time was even worth spending

on this issue—an unfortunately all-too-common occurrence for myself and others with disabilities.

But Judge Barrett did something altogether different. She sat silently, listening with deep attention as I explained my situation. She exuded calm and compassion, giving me the freedom to let down my guard and come apart. As a person with a disability, I am constantly playing the role of self-advocate. I am accustomed to projecting an air of self-assuredness even when I do not feel it, of acting like I have everything under control when in reality the world feels like it is spinning out from under me. But in front of Judge Barrett, I was able to let the mask slip—indeed, to disappear completely. I poured out all of my concerns—my worries about failing classes, having to choose between completing my assignments and figuring out how to get to the grocery store independently, and feeling as though the energy spent troubleshooting these issues was preventing me from forging friendships. When I finished, Judge Barrett leaned forward and looked at me intently. “Laura,” she said, with the same measured conviction that she has displayed throughout her nomination process, “this is no longer your problem. It’s my problem.”

I have recounted this story many times, and yet I still feel it is impossible to capture adequately the relief that washed over me at the sound of her words. People with disabilities will likely understand the rarity of her offer as a general matter. But even when extended, it is unfortunately the case that many well-intentioned advocates do not follow through. In sum, it is hard to trust an offer of assistance, no matter how desperately it is needed or how earnestly it is given.

Not so with Judge Barrett. Anyone who has interacted with her knows that she is a woman of her word. She means what she says, and she says what she means. When she promised that she would advocate *for* me, not just *with* me, she commanded my trust. I knew, instantly, that Judge Barrett would deliver.

I was not disappointed. To this day, I do not know how Judge Barrett advocated on my behalf, which is itself a testament to her humility. All I know is that the problem was quickly resolved. This allowed me to excel in my first semester and to place me in a position that would eventually enable me to pursue the seemingly impossible dream of clerking on the Supreme Court.

This encounter was the first in which Judge Barrett demonstrated the depth of her generous spirit, but it was far from the last. When I went through a health scare during my third year of law school, Judge Barrett provided practical advice about how to successfully get through the semester academically. More important, however, she strengthened me with ongoing (and unsolicited) emotional support, lending an ear to help me work through far more transcendent questions such as how to bear suffering and uncertainty graciously. When I experienced discrimination in the hiring process because of my disability, Judge Barrett listened attentively, never dismissing my concerns and always ready to beat back the negative dialogue that threatened to distract me from my goals. When I arrived for my clerkship on the DC Circuit, I struggled with insecurities that perhaps I was not qualified enough for the position, or that my disability would prevent me from participating fully as a clerk. Again, Judge Barrett was there with open arms and an open mind. This woman with so many commitments and pressures on

her time nevertheless freely volunteered herself to minister to my emotional needs and offered practical and creative solutions to the very real accessibility obstacles I was facing.

And so, it should come as no surprise that, when it came time to consider applying for a clerkship on the Supreme Court, it was Judge Barrett's opinion that I valued most. I knew that if she—this woman of towering intellect and unfailing honesty—told me that I was up for the task and should not allow my disability to dissuade me from applying, I once again had no choice but to believe her. Like so many other times before, Amy Coney Barrett's judgment proved sound. In no small part because of her assistance and support, I can proudly state that I completed my clerkship successfully, fully confident in the knowledge that I participated on equal footing with my sighted colleagues.

In her opening remarks, Judge Barrett described a mentor who gave her a treasured book of literature to commemorate their relationship. Judge Barrett has now passed that torch onto me, giving me a gift of immeasurable value: the ability to pursue an abundant life with the potential to break down barriers so that I can leave this world a better place than I found it. I can only hope that I will do so with half as much grace, poise, and courage as she has modeled for me in life and now for the American people.

I am here today to share with you my story. But to me, the very best aspect of that story is that it is far from unique. Those who have had the benefit of knowing Amy Coney Barrett could fill volumes recounting her numerous acts of quiet, humble service. Whether she is assisting a combat veteran to work through the debilitating pain he suffered as a result of his injuries, advising a married woman on how best to balance work and family obligations, or helping an inexperienced student prepare for an upcoming high-stakes interview, Judge Barrett possesses a boundless font of energy and a radical sense of love that she is ever-ready to pour out upon those lucky enough to call her teacher, boss, family, and friend.

My relationship with Judge Barrett has taught me that she is a woman of unassailable integrity. She will serve this country with distinction not only because of her intellectual prowess, but also because of her compassionate heart and her years of practice treating others as equals deserving of complete respect. As a beneficiary of both of these qualities, I urge you to confirm Judge my Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court of the United States. Thank you.