

Best of Pioneers and Pathfinders: Kristen Sonday

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Steve Poor

Hi. This is Steve Poor, and you're listening to Pioneers and Pathfinders.

This week, we're shining a spotlight on meaningful innovation in the access-to-justice space by revisiting our conversation with Kristen Sonday, co-founder and CEO of Paladin. Kristen and her team are transforming the way pro bono work happens—making it easier for law firms, legal departments, and nonprofits to connect lawyers with opportunities while cutting down on the administrative friction that so often gets in the way. For anyone interested in justice tech, Paladin remains a standout example of innovation driven by real impact. We hope you enjoy this replay.

This week, we're diving into the world of access to justice with Kristen Sonday, a true trailblazer in making pro bono legal work more efficient and effective. Kristen is the co-founder and CEO of Paladin, an organization dedicated to increasing pro bono engagement while reducing administrative burdens. Through partnerships with law firms, corporate legal teams, bar associations, the US government and over 300 legal service organizations, Paladin is helping to bridge the justice gap by streamlining how legal professionals connect with those in need. Before launching Paladin, Kristen worked on international criminal matters for the US Department of Justice in Mexico and Central America, and was part of the founding team of a New York City-based tech startup. She also shares her insights in her NextGen Justice Tech column for Thomson Reuters Institute, where she explores the role of technology in expanding access to justice. Beyond her work in legal tech, Kristen is a founding partner of LongJump, a Chicago-based venture capital fund focused on supporting the next generation of founders. Kristen takes us through how Paladin is creating a blueprint for justice technology, her journey into access to justice work, the mission of LongJump, and the key lessons she's learned from her entrepreneurial journey. Let's get started by listening in.

Kristen, welcome to the podcast. Thanks so much for making the time.

Kristen Sonday

Oh, thank you for having me.

Steve Poor

Let's start by talking about Paladin, which is an award-winning A2J space organization. Talk to us about Paladin's mission and the problem it's trying to solve.

Kristen Sonday

Our mission at Paladin is to increase access to justice by helping legal teams run more efficient pro bono programs. My co founder Felicity Levy and I started the company a number of years ago, and

what we found at the time, when I learned through Felicity's experience as a litigator at a big am law firm in New York, is that there was a ton of interest in doing pro bono work, but the way in which Pro Bono was managed was quite manual and laborious. It was really through a labyrinth of emails and spreadsheets that made it harder for attorneys to engage than they should have to if they're looking to help others in need. And so essentially, our goal at Paladin is to leverage technology and really do three things. The first is make it a lot easier to centralize pro bono intake across a variety of legal services organizations. So, we work with about 350 legal services organizations across the country. We give them a free version of the tool. Or instead of sending out weekly emails, they can just enter their cases into Paladin ones with a click of a button, send them out in real time to all of the firms, corporate teams, bars, the Justice Department on our network, so they have that real time visibility. And then on the firm side, we've been able to save about 80% of the administrative work in having that centralized intake in one place. Another goal that we have is to make it really seamless for attorneys to search for, learn about and sign up for pro bono with a click of a button. So, we're essentially creating the first real time database of pro bono cases across the country, where they can go in at any point and find an opportunity that's going to match their interests, their skill sets, the time that they have available, and the types of work they want to do. And on average, we've been able to increase engagement by over 30% in the first year on Paladin just by making it incredibly easy and giving attorneys access to pro bono at their fingertips where it's never lived before. So, it's been really fun to watch the company evolve over the past few years, and at this point, we've helped over 50,000 individuals in need through making more seamless pro bono connections.

Steve Poor

That's awesome. No wonder you've won so many awards. Where do you see the application of technology applying both in terms of making things more efficient, but in terms of the actual client, there's a limit to the human capability even made as efficiently as possible, and that the A2J gap is so big, it's not going to get closed just by the application of human effort. Talk us through that side of the problem.

Kristen Sonday

It's a great point. So, the Legal Services Corporation, which is the largest federal funder of legal aid in the country, they report that about 92% of civil legal issues for low-income Americans are either not met at all or are met inadequately, and that's because of a severe lack of capacity. To your point, especially legal services organizations, which have to turn away about 50% of people who qualify just due to a lack of human capacity. So, our first goal with Paladin is to help fill that gap by encouraging more volunteer engagement. To your point, pro bono is a part of the solution. Solution, but it's not the entire solution, and I really see it as one tool in our toolkit to help solve this justice gap. Technology is going to be a half, is going to have to be a part of this multifaceted approach because of the way that it can scale and help people en masse. I see three big applications and opportunities to leverage technology to help with the gap that I'm really excited about. The first is helping individuals directly. So there are a number of legal services organizations, like Legal Aid of North Carolina, for example, that is working on chat bots to help intake client questions directly and then provide relevant legal information, not advice through their website, and make sure that we're in taking folks accurately and directing them to the right resources, whether that is a human or it's another online resource. Rent intervention is another great example out of Illinois. Conor Malloy built out another chat bot that helps answer basic landlord tenant

questions for low-income individuals who need help. He's taking that to his new organization, CARPLS, and is building out some voice recognition tools around the technology to help meet people where they are. Since not everyone has access to chat bots and other technologies specifically, but I think through creating technologies like this that do scale, we can help answer a lot more individuals questions at the beginning of their legal journey, and help starve off some of the heavier and deeper, more serious legal issues they might encounter down the road. That's one example.

Steve Poor

Let me follow up with a question on that before we move to the second example, because you hit on a challenge that I find fascinating in the way different people are trying to solve it, which is the technology is great. People have to have the mechanical tools, the computers, the smartphones, the tablets, in order to access it. How do you deal with that barrier?

Kristen Sonday

It's such a good question. And frankly, you hit on one of the main points that keeps me up at night is that, you know, there's so much hype around AI and advanced technologies and how we can apply it when oftentimes, specifically, when thinking about the justice gap, the answer is in very low tech, basic solutions. So whether that's making sure that things are mobile responsive versus desktop responsive, whether we're translating materials and information into other languages, whether we're sending text reminders for court dates, which has been shown to significantly increase the number the appearance rate, whether we are creating materials without legal jargon, since that's a huge barrier to folks understanding what options they have within our legal system. I think there are multiple ways to leverage technology, but we have to be conscious of the different resources that folks have available in different communities, and make sure that we're creating a really user-centric approach in the way that we're building solutions?

Steve Poor

No, I think that's right. I presume you see it like I see it sometimes where people come up with solutions, but they haven't identified the problem, or they haven't identified all the barriers to solving the problem. It's frustrating, isn't it?

Kristen Sonday

Absolutely, and that's why it's so important to co develop these solutions in partnership with the clients who will actually be using them. I really admire the legal services organizations that are on the ground with their clients, day in and day out, asking questions, taking survey details, and really understanding the pain points that they're trying to solve and how folks might engage with potential solutions before going out and just building them at Paladin, that's a really important part of our process. Before we build anything for our clients, we'll do focus groups and have research sessions to make sure that we truly understand at what point in their workflow we can support them, and then drill down on the actual problem that we need to solve and then explore potential solutions, and observe physically how they might use potential solutions to make sure we're maximizing for engagement.

Steve Poor

So, Paladin has been around nine years now, 10 years.

Kristen Sonday

Oh my gosh, don't age me. Yes. We launched formally in 2016, did a lot of research, but actually went to market in 2019, so there were a lot of research sessions and pivots between those years.

Steve Poor

Tell me about the journey. I mean, you've been incredibly successful, but it can have been a linear approach to it. Every startup has its bumps and has its ups and downs. Has the journey been what you thought it was going to be when you started.

Kristen Sonday

The journey has been very difficult and also very rewarding. There are a couple of things that set Paladin apart from the average enterprise, SaaS startup. The first thing that surprised me is that, because there's never been a pro bono software before that is kind of marketplace enabled, providing matching between two sets of constituents is that there were really kind of two levels of education amongst our buyers and end users that we had to overcome. So, it wasn't just explaining to people why Paladin was the right solution to help manage their pro bono program. It was also explaining to law firm leadership why pro bono in general is worth an investment beyond the current resourcing and what the business benefits could be in addition to the community benefits. And I don't think there's ever been a robust ROI analysis of pro bono as a business case, and that's something that we're working to articulate, because we do need buy in at all levels. So that was definitely a key learning. The other thing I'd say is that we were creating a new product category, and so that required a lot of change management. It required a lot of input from our early constituents and CO development partners to make sure that we were hitting on an actual problem to be solved, and that we're continuing to iterate with our stakeholders, since no one else is doing what we're doing, which is a huge opportunity and is really exciting, and it's also a bit scary, because there's no precedent off of which to work. So those two elements have made it a really interesting journey and really rewarding, as we've been able to come so far in those years, you've been able to get quite a bit of funding.

Steve Poor

You make the point that you're the most funded justice tech startup. What's the value proposition you offer to the funders? Obviously, it's an opportunity to invest in an organization that's doing some good for the society. So, there's an imperative there. But people don't always fund stuff just because they think it's doing good.

Kristen Sonday

That's definitely been a challenge as well. So, in the same way, we have to demonstrate to firm leadership the business case for pro bono. I've had to demonstrate the business and investment case for pro bono technology. And for us, what was exciting for the investors is that there is already a preexisting culture of pro bono among the legal community. Right? The American Bar Association has a rule supporting 50 hours of pro bono for professional responsibility. And so there was an existing ecosystem, but there had never really been a tech solution bringing together the ecosystem, and that definitely helped tell the story about the market that we were entering and helping to build at the same time, it's really important for me to demonstrate that you can do well by doing good, because I love all

the nonprofits we work with, and one big challenge they're facing now is about funding, and having federal funding pulled and other funders pull out, and so Creating sustainability among a justice tech solution is very, very important to me in ensuring that we have long lasting solutions that don't require external funding all the time. And so, I think what we're doing is building a blueprint that other justice technologies can use and demonstrate that you can do well, do good and build something long lasting.

Steve Poor

You hit on a point that leads me to the following question. You talk about federal funding and the unreliability of it? Well, let's assume we're entering a time period where that's become even more unreliable. How are A2J not for profit organizations, not necessarily Paladin, but other organizations, how are they going to cope with the reduction in federal funding, which has been the lifeblood for a lot of these organizations?

Kristen Sonday

We're working through it all now in real time, to be honest, and I'll say two things on it. The first is that in the past, when we have had real time crises happen, that's actually when I've seen lawyers galvanize the most around the Legal Aid communities and getting involved. So, for example, the Muslim ban was the first time that we saw attorneys coming together and wanting to get involved in pro bono who hadn't participated before. During COVID, we worked with the ABA to launch the first nationwide pro bono portal to help individuals with COVID related legal issues, and we helped thousands of people in the first couple months after the war in Ukraine broke out, we worked with the local legal development network in Kyiv to build a pro bono portal to help with some of the Eastern European countries and related immigration issues. So, we really do see folks coming together in unprecedented times to support the community in an incredible way, and we're starting to see that now, and I hope that that continues. The second thing that we're looking at is just thinking more deeply about how technology can be a part of the solution. Information, we already know that it can help provide more legal information and resources to people in need. And we're also thinking a lot about, how do we provide advanced AI and technological tools to legal services organizations to increase at least their tech capacity if they're not able to maintain the same headcount? And then also thinking about, how do we empower pro bono attorneys with greater resources, automated tools, training materials, so we can really supercharge the pro bono side of the equation and help more people more effectively.

Steve Poor

Where do you see technology going, and how do you keep up with it? I mean, it changes so rapidly. The next thing you know, we're at four, oh, or we're at grok or whatever. It's hard to keep track of developments in the technology. How do you keep pace with it, with everything else you've got going on in your in your business and personal life?

Kristen Sonday

We're really thoughtful and intentional about how we think about AI and advanced technologies. So frankly, we have not rushed to create any one solution we're thinking about instead, how do we apply it to our existing clients workflow, and how do we make them more efficient and effective at what they do within Paladin and our day to day, rather than just build one off tools? So I think it's a combination of keeping tabs on what's happening locally, but also figuring out how do you incorporate it really smartly,

and also how do you work with key constituents in building solutions that will help them tackle specific problems, that's going to help guide how AI is applied to the justice gap more broadly.

Steve Poor

You obviously have a passion for this. You're involved in it, not just because Paladins is a great organization, but because of the mission and the ability to help others. Where does that passion come from? Talk us through your background a little bit. How did you come to this point?

Kristen Sonday

I am first generation college Latina. Grew up in New Jersey, and was lucky enough to go to Princeton, where I got exposed to so many brilliant people, and along with that, a lot of the biggest challenges globally. And I really fell in love with the idea of creating justice and understanding what was right and what was wrong, and wanting to write a system that felt so lopsided. And so my first job out of college was with the US Justice Department, doing international criminal work between Mexico City and DC, and it was really there that I got to see firsthand how complicated our system is to navigate, especially for folks who weren't educated, weren't citizens, didn't speak English, and I also got to see the value of having an advocate with you on that journey. So whether, in our case, that was us, Attorney's Office, the TAs office, really having someone with you to navigate that system could mean the difference between winning and losing a case, and in some cases, life or death, and that was really the moment in which I knew that I wanted to spend my life building solutions to help underserved communities gain access to legal resources information advocates that could allow them to have a fairer shot at our justice system. After DOJ, I joined the founding team of a tech company in New York that we took through Y Combinator, which is the leading accelerator in the world, and that's where I learned how to build a company from the ground up. So, we raised a ton of money and expanded internationally, and I was a key part of that growth, which was exciting. And now Paladin is really a merger of those two experiences and figuring out, how do we leverage technology at scale to help address this access issue.

Steve Poor

That's fascinating. Where do you see Paladin going in the next 2, 3, 4 years. You've talked a little bit some of the capabilities you're hoping to achieve, but give us the big picture.

Kristen Sonday

I would like for Paladin to be the go-to pro bono platform globally. And while the pro bono platform itself is doing a great job in connecting people in need with attorneys who can help them, I think there is a huge opportunity to build new tech tools on top of this platform that facilitate more efficient and effective work across the board. So whether that is building tools, this is a pretty natural extension of our current platform to help attorneys do their pro bono work more efficiently, or whether it's helping our LSOs build out their internal tech stack, if you will, to make them more effective and then also ultimately helping them build tools to interface directly with clients. I think we're in a really unique position to help develop tools across the ecosystem that are unifying, consistent and truly empowering.

Steve Poor

What are the challenges of operating globally in your sphere? I mean, I got to assume you. Built this for the US market, based on the culture and dynamics of the justice system and pro bono organizations and everything else, which are similar, but in some ways different than which country you go to. How are you going to grapple with those variations, and how do you deal with that?

Kristen Sonday

It's a great question. So, we actually completed our first global rollout last year with Clifford chance, which, of course, is one of the largest and greatest firms in the world. And through that partnership, we demonstrated that the technology could be applied anywhere. And we have folks signing up for pro bono, literally across the world every day. What's different, of course, is that the pro bono cultures in each country are very nuanced. Some are more similar to the US than others, but we are having to take into account everything from more conceptual cultural understandings of pro bono and attorneys, relationships with it, the obligation responsibility versus being driven by the firms as the culture carrier. That's been interesting to explore down to very detailed, you know, changing the wording of our tagging system internally to match how lawyers engage and with different terminology in different places. So, I'd say there's a more conceptual exploration of how we think about and adapt to pro bono around the world. And then there's also just a literal, tactical, day to day updating of the platform that we need to accommodate pro bono. But it's exciting. And so many of our clients, about 80% are multinational, so to be able to service them globally is really important to us, and we couldn't do it without local experts, so it's exciting to get them involved in the conversation. And actually, internationalization is a big priority for us for 2025.

Steve Poor

Oh, that's great. There's a lot of need in the States, but there's a lot of need globally. So absolutely, let me ask you about LongJump. You're also a founder of that, which is a fund investing in the next generation of founders. Expand a little bit more on that and tell us how that idea came to you.

Kristen Sonday

Yes, of course. So LongJump is an early stage first check venture capital fund based out of Chicago. So, I was one of the founding partners. And at this point, we've written checks in about 40 companies all across Illinois, and it's been great to help catalyze rounds of funding for really impressive founders who just didn't have access to the same networks that some of the rest of us do, and their companies have been flourishing. They've been able to attract new capital, and we're helping them with different resources to help their startups grow in a way that they might not have been able to on their own. And for me, especially as first-generation Latina female founder. It's been really rewarding to help pay that forward.

Steve Poor

How do you find qualified founders? How does it work?

Kristen Sonday

Oh, man. I mean, we're in in the community with them. So, these are our friends who are hustling and grinding every day. They're parts of accelerator and incubator programs in the neighborhood. We get a lot of referrals word of mouth. We have a big online presence. You know, you don't need a warm

introduction to us. You can just reach out, apply online. Really, we're trying to minimize the barriers for folks to connect with LongJump and submit that application and meet with the partners. So, it's really a variety of sources, and we've been lucky to really accelerate the rate of application and adoption and funding in the past few years. I think we've exceeded folks' initial expectations.

Steve Poor

Is there's a particular type of company that you're looking to invest in. I mean, you focused on A2J space, but is LongJump, focused on people looking for solutions for the A2J problem, or is it broader than that?

Kristen Sonday

LongJump is industry agnostic, so we will invest in mostly anything that's not hard tech or deep tech, because we do want to be able to leverage our networks and our expertise to help them. So, it really spans the spectrum. I don't think we've done a legal tech company yet, though. So, this is an open call to legal tech founders listening to, you know, check out LongJump and apply or reach out to me about it, because I would love to support some folks in our space.

Steve Poor

And for those interested, we'll put a link in the show notes so you can get it so tell us some of the success stories you've had at LongJump.

Kristen Sonday

Oh, my goodness, at LongJump. But depends on how you define success. I mean, to a number of our founders, it's being able to catalyze larger funding rounds. You know, we'll write the first 100k check, and we've had founders go on to raise over a million dollars that they might not have been able to raise before. So, it's been great to have helped put that round together and help them scale and really get to that next stage of proof of concept and an MVP in the market. For others, it's helping them land their first big enterprise client through our networks, finding new hires. Really, for me, helping founders is about two things. It's about cash and contracts. If we can help them raise money and land new clients, that's half the battle. And then, you know, they'll figure it out as they go. But really, for me, those two things are crucial.

Steve Poor

Let's go back to Paladin for a minute. You co founded Paladin. How did you and your co founder meet so Felicity and

Kristen Sonday

I met through a mutual friend in New York. And ironically enough, we met, actually at a music festival on the Jersey Shore. And it was, it was...

Steve Poor

There's a TV show in here, I think.

Kristen Sonday

There may or may not be, but yes, we, we met. This was new scene for me, and we hit it off. And she had actually just come off of winning an asylum case for Colombian men and his family who were being persecuted by a local guerrilla group. And so, she was telling me about her experience, I was telling her about my work the Department of Justice, and we hit it off immediately. And we ended up spending hours in like this tent in the sand on the side of the festival, talking about the justice gap. I mean, you can't make this up. And she was telling me about this idea for Paladin, and I was at the tech startup, and I thought, you know what? This? This really feels like a place where technology can help. I want to get in on it. And so the next day, and this says probably so much about me, but I sent her a 12 page PowerPoint presentation about why I should be her partner, and we are all it's interesting, I think, you know, in building technology, this raises a good point, though, it's so important to assemble a team that is complimentary and not full of people who think the same way and have the same experiences. So, I'm actually not a lawyer. I'm more of a technologist and a businessperson, and I really relate to the pro bono clients that we're helping. And Felicity, of course, was litigator at a big firm in New York. She had done the pro bono she had experienced the problem firsthand, and I really do think that our skill sets are complementary, and by involving a lot of people in the process with different perspectives, you can build the most well-rounded product. So, I'm very grateful for Felicity for taking a bet on me and my PowerPoint.

Steve Poor

Twelve-page PowerPoint. That's awesome. That's awesome. So, you start with two How do you decide who number three is? How do you look at the business and say the next person we are? I mean, clearly you want somebody who's going to fit in with you, going to work well with and is going to be a cultural but from a skill set standpoint, do you go technology? Do you go business? Do you go researcher? How do you how do you make that decision? And what did you do.

Kristen Sonday

If you're going to build a tech product, you definitely want to find the best technical talent that you can. So, we were really lucky to bring on a CTO early to help build the product and evolve with us. A rule of thumb is that really you want the founders involved in sales, outreach, product development, really everything early on before you bring in new folks to assist you, because you want to make sure you're really steeped in it, day in and day out, and understanding the acute problems that you're trying to solve before jumping to solutions. And so, it was really important that we kept the team as small as possible early on, so we could figure those things out. So, our CTO is the third hire, and then our fourth hire, which was a piece of the DNA that Felicity and I were missing, was on the legal services side. So we brought in someone who had been a leader within a legal services organization, so that she could speak to their perspective as we were building so we really tried to represent each constituency that our product touches, so that as we built we could be really thoughtful and intentional and tap into our networks and build something that was going to be well informed.

Steve Poor

As you look back on it, I know we're running a bit over in terms of time, so this is a last question, I promise. But as you look back on it, what would you have done differently if anything?

Kristen Sonday

That is a great question so many things. It's so funny. I've been wrong more often throughout my startup journey than I've been right. So, I think one of the things that we should have done sooner was get closer to our end users and really more. Deeply understand the product that we were trying to solve. So, for example, our very first version of Paladin, the goal was to connect legal services organizations with solos or small firms or even the smaller, medium sized firms to help scale their pro bono programs. Because we assumed that the big firms had these big teams, they had resources, they didn't really need technology. And that assumption turned out to be completely wrong. It was actually--

Steve Poor

Oh my. I could have told you that.

Kristen Sonday

Oh, my goodness. Well, that's the thing we didn't know. And so and so we, we really, I think, should have exhausted our conversations amongst the entirety of the ecosystem early on to figure out where we could help support and it was these larger organizations, of course, that ended up being Paladins first partners, because they were so close to the problem, day in and day out, of how manual it was, and they saw immediately the value that technology could provide. And once we kind of locked in with that group, it was off to the races.

Steve Poor

You made a point in there that, okay, I lied. I do have one follow up question, but I'm a lawyer, so there you go. You made the point that you made mistakes. And I think as people go in to considering starting up a company are going into entrepreneurship. They're afraid of making mistakes. They think it's got to be perfect in order to be successful. What advice do you give people who come to you and say, I'm looking to found the company?

Kristen Sonday

Yes, really good question. So, there are a couple things. The most important thing I've learned is that you need to figure out your competitive advantage and really leverage that to build a unique value proposition, we had to understand what were the unique things that we were doing and could do that no one else was doing or could replicate, and really double down on the areas where we found we could add value. So, number one, finding your competitive advantage. Number two, staying really close to your users so that you understand the problem that you're trying to solve, I think too often today, these legal tech companies or solutions looking for a problem rather than the other way around. And then number three, is just making sure you're involving a variety of stakeholders and perspectives in these conversations, so that you are complementing your skill sets and making sure that you're really augmenting for a well-rounded set of perspectives as you build.

Steve Poor

The solution in search of a problem is, is a common theme, isn't it? I've seen lots of presentations where people get so enamored with their technology and all the cool stuff it does. And you ask the question, what does it do for me? What problem are you trying to solve? And is it a problem I need solved?

Kristen Sonday

Well, and it's interesting also being on the other side of it with LongJump. Now that founders pitch me for investment, I learn a lot from them as we go. I used to pitch that we were solving the justice gap, and in reality, we weren't. I mean, we're trying to solve for that, but what we're really solving for is an efficiency problem within the pro bono workflow, and by getting really specific about that problem that you're trying to solve, that's how you're going to be able to add value and scale your company, not the other way around.

Steve Poor

Absolutely. Well, Kristen, you're doing some important work in a fabulous way. Congratulations, and I can't wait to continue to follow the success of you and Paladin thanks for making the time. I appreciate it.

Kristen Sonday

I appreciate it. Thank you.

Steve Poor

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