

Pioneers and Pathfinders: Michele DeStefano Returns

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Steve Poor

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

As we close out our fifth year, we welcome back one of our early guests, Michele DeStefano, for a fascinating return conversation. Michele is a professor at the University of Miami School of Law, a visiting professor at Harvard Law School, and the founder of LawWithoutWalls. Her work sits at the intersection of leadership, collaboration, and innovation in professional services.

In this episode, we explore how artificial intelligence may reshape collaboration, training, and legal education. Michele also discusses the importance of integrating human elements into AI applications, the challenges of adapting legal training to meet modern demands, and the kinds of new roles that may emerge as the profession continues to evolve. As always, Michele brings energy, insight, and a deep commitment to helping the legal profession rethink how it learns, collaborates, and leads in a rapidly changing world. It was great to have one of our old friends back, and I hope you enjoyed the conversation.

Michele, it's great to see you. Thanks for coming back on the podcast. I appreciate it.

Michele DeStefano

Thanks so much for having me. I was thrilled to be asked to come back.

Steve Poor

Well, you were one of our very first guests five years ago, and as we reach our anniversary, we're reaching out to old friends, but not much has happened in the last five years. So, you know, I'm not sure what we're going to talk about.

Michele DeStefano

I agree. I mean, nothing's changed since 2021 right?

Steve Poor

I think when we were last talking, we were still dealing with the pandemic and how to go virtual and how to teach virtually, and what it meant for your work on collaboration. And now we've, we've moved a little forward from that, haven't we?

Michele DeStefano

Yes, we've moved a great deal forward, probably a lot to do with something called AI.

Steve Poor

Oh, yes, that's right, I guess. I guess there's a law that says every podcast has to talk about AI. So I suppose we should do that.

Michele DeStefano

Yeah, I don't think we can't talk about AI.

Steve Poor

No. I mean, a lot of your work has been around leadership and culture and mindsets, talking about innovation as a result of those characteristics, as opposed to tools. How has your thinking changed if it has, or strengthened if it has, with the onset of generative AI?

Michele DeStefano

I guess I feel like the world has finally come to my mindset, that the key differential for all of us is going to be how we work, not what we actually do, because as AI starts to level the playing field, which it is, people are catching up from that expertise standpoint. So what matters more is who you are, how you interact with people, whether you have empathy, adaptability, whether you can listen, whether you can communicate with an open heart, open mind, open door. Those are the three rules of engagement for Law Without Walls, that I think are even more important today.

Steve Poor

In a sense, we're becoming a more human profession than we were before, which is kind of weird to say when you're dealing with technology and robots taking over the world, but you've been ahead of that game for a while.

Michele DeStefano

I I don't know if I've been ahead. Thank you for saying that. I agree with you. It's about keeping the human touch, keeping the human in the loop, keeping the human touch on the AI, both from a judgment standpoint, but an emotional standpoint as well. For any young people out there thinking about jobs, my number one recommendation would be client facing. Find a job where you're interacting with other humans, because AI is taking those other jobs over.

Steve Poor

Oh, that's good advice. How do you think this affects training of lawyers, the development of lawyers? I mean, we've had a time and grade training system where people look at documents and then they write discovery, and then they draft agreements, and they sort of learn by osmosis over a period of years. That's changing.

Michele DeStefano

It's changing really fast, and it's really scary because, for example, I was just at a law firm running a workshop, and of course, partners ask professors like me, what are law schools going to do to change? Because it used to be that the way you would train a first year associate, for example, is you might have them go through a contract and red line, or look at different versions or identify clauses. Now, with an AI tool, a senior associate who has discernment can actually do that in 10 minutes, so you can't justify giving it to this associate who might take 10 hours and make mistakes. Now, AI might make mistakes too, but again, a senior associate that already has done this many, many times for five years, seven years, they can use the tool and know when the tool is making a mistake. So this leaves training associates in a big gap for law firms or even corporate legal departments that are hiring directly out of law school. I know that doesn't happen that often in the United States, but it sometimes happens outside the US. I think law schools are coming around. University of Miami is doing a lot with AI. That said, let's be frank, law schools have never trained law school students so that they're job ready to be first year associates.

Steve Poor

Not in the last 46 years anyway.

Michele DeStefano

Right? So that's not going to change. I think the way we teach will change. I think we'll be helping these young minds learn how to use these tools in our profession. But I don't think that we're ever going to make them associate ready. I think what's going to happen is that the law firms are going to figure out how to train them in a different way, and it may be actually, with a robot. Yeah, no, I've seen some discussion around, you know, the creation of personas in the in the AI technology to use to develop this experiential training. So I've been in the last two months, interviewing chief legal officers, big corporations to find out how they're using AI and how that's going to impact business development for law firms, how they keep clients, how they get new clients. And three of the 20 so far already have digital agents, agentic AI that they have given names that they consider on their team who have their own workflows and responsibilities.

Steve Poor

Okay, now you're creeping me out.

Michele DeStefano

I'm not kidding. I'm not making it up.

Steve Poor

They've named they've named them. Oh, my God.

Michele DeStefano

They named them. They're on their org chart. Juan cielo even told me that his goal was within the next two years to have 50% of his people be agentic AIs.

Steve Poor

Wow, you've left me speechless. It doesn't happen very often. It really doesn't. I mean, I've seen the studies that talk about internal legal departments being far ahead in the use of AI as opposed to outside law firms. But I guess you're, you're landing the plane in a way that sort of is, it's amazing, really, when you, when you begin to, begin to think about it. How do they think they're going to develop? So, you've got agentic AI taking on these tasks. They've got their own workflows. And I know that we say, okay, the people are going to do what humans do best, empathy and judgment and wisdom, which doesn't come out of the box, and it doesn't come from law school. How are the general how are the CLO is going to train the people to take on those roles. If a genic AI is taking on a lot of the work that's being handled.

Michele DeStefano

Well, one way is for them to sponsor a team in law without walls. That's what we're designed to train. We're designed to train senior people how to collaborate better, with more empathy and with more open mindedness in multidisciplinary teams on an innovation journey. Now that was a plug for myself. I'm sorry, plug for my nonprofit, which I always say is one of my children. That said, I think in house, aren't that worried about it, because generally, they hire from the law firms, and the law firms do the training. So maybe they're hoping that the law firms are going to figure this out. I don't know if that's the case. I know I have told all my children. I have three biological two that are step so five, all between the ages of 26, and 20, and I told them all that if they want to go to law school, they have to also go to business school.

Steve Poor

That's great advice.

Michele DeStefano

Because in business school, you you work in teams. From day one, you're actually graded with your team. And in law school, when I do that and make them do a project and say you're all getting the same grade, it drives them bonkers.

Steve Poor

That's not the way law students are wired. Is it?

Michele DeStefano

No, it's all me, me, me, me, myself. I, you know, rise or fall, all I'm all by myself. That's a lonely way to be.

Steve Poor

But it's been that way for a long time. Let's move back to Law Without Walls, the collaboration part of it. How has the advent of generative AI affected your ability to get people to learn how to collaborate? For example, are you teaching them to collaborate with AI agents? Are you teaching them? Is it more important to learn to collaborate with other professions? Has it made it easier, or has it just made it more virtual?

Michele DeStefano

Well, so Law Without Walls was always part virtual. That was back in 2011. We're in our 15th year. So we were working virtually before the world even knew what that meant. We had an all virtual program and a part virtual program. So we flipped in 2019 to an in person only program. We teach the students virtually, but the actual sprint is three days in person, because the world is going so fast. We work in sprints and we work in companies together with other people from different disciplines. So Law Without Walls always has Law and Business School students, lawyers and business professionals on every team. And with AI, the first year it came out, December or Fall of 2022, three months later, we had the teams work with AI right away, and some of them didn't even know what it was. Luckily, Dentons always sponsors a team, and they already had a AI tool that they'd been working on, and they let everybody in Law Without Walls during our sprint use it, and made it closed, so that none of the information we put in went to the outside world, but it still could use the benefit of the OpenAI. And so, that was the first year, but this is our third year. Now we don't have to do that, because everyone has their own tools, and we tell them to use AI to help them, but we give them do's and don'ts because we all know what AI sounds like when you let it draft itself, and you don't give it context, and you don't give it a role. I tell it.

Steve Poor

It's a mess.

Michele DeStefano

It's a mess, right? But if you give, if I so, for example, if I give three letters of recommendation I've written in the past, and I tell it, I want you to behave like a woman who's a professor who's somewhere over 40. We'll just leave it that. You are too somewhere over 40.

Steve Poor

Oh, 40 was a long time ago.

Michele DeStefano

And then I say, but I want you to be a little more conversational than the average professor. And here's some of the things I've written, and here's some other things. So can you rewrite this draft of a letter of recommendation to change it to sound more like me, and add this, this and that it does wonders. Or if I

said, Now I want you to switch it, take the same letter, and I want you to write it like you're a 30 year old male who works in technology and is very succinct. Chat will do that. Chat is really great at following directions. If you give it enough directions, it still messes up, and you have to tell it when it messes up. So what we tell our teams is some do's and don'ts we have every team write consumer stories. What does that mean? One of the problems that I think lawyers face often when they're problem solving is they're only thinking of one stakeholder, instead of all the various stakeholders of their clients that matter. So in Law Without Walls, when we're solving the problem, we make them stakeholder, map the problem, and then we have them write. We call them consumer stories, but they're stakeholder stories for each stakeholder that describes exactly how that person's feeling, what they ate for breakfast, how it happens that this problem keeps occurring, or how they're causing the problem, whatever it is, but it's really detailed, so you get to be like, this is Steven Poor. He is a somewhere over 40s lawyer who has been super successful. He is frustrated when ... So that's sort of what we do. What we say is, don't have open AI write the first draft. You write it and then ask open AI to poke holes in it, to show weaknesses in the story, to ask questions, where are the missing parts of the story? It's really good at that, and more lawyers should use it for that. They make their arguments, put it in there and say, Hey, tell me the counter arguments to this.

Steve Poor

Yeah, I heard somebody refer to it as sort of the sandwich theory of using a you write the first draft, you put it in for comments and context for ChatGPT or Claude or whatever you happen to be using, and then the other side of the sandwich is your own sort of analysis and tinkering with it and finalizing it. And I don't think a lot of people follow that path.

Michele DeStefano

No, that has to be how you do it, and that's why I don't understand why everyone thinks that, just because we have AI, that if it only took me 10 minutes to do it, that that's worth only 10 minutes of my time, because before 10 minutes, I couldn't get as much done, and I didn't have this great tool to help me be even better. So as firms and their clients are rethinking how law firms are going to bill for their work. On the one hand, I agree that the billable hour is probably not the best for the law firm in the future unless, of course, all you want is more pie and want to keep doing the same thing just for more clients. That said, I don't think it's that if you did keep the billable hour that you automatically get the entire savings over to the client. Number one, there's an investment in the technology. And number two, you're getting a better product now, no matter how long it took you, as long as you make sure the AI doesn't hallucinate and you check it. But of course, that's what lawyers are supposed to do anyway. We're never supposed to just take something someone else says at face value, we're supposed to confirm it.

Steve Poor

That's an interesting point, isn't it that people think something comes from a computer, particularly one is verbal, as the various AI models are these days, and they can just take it at face value, whereas if you are getting something from a first year associate who you never worked with before, you would say, back in my day, you'd say, copy the cases and I want to read the ones that were citing.

Michele DeStefano

You would check their work.

Steve Poor

You check their work.

Michele DeStefano

Yeah.

Steve Poor

It's human error. It's not...

Michele DeStefano

Plus, they're getting better and better. They really are. But I mean, every day, the various types of generative AI are getting more accurate. And I think within, I think five years from now, hopefully when you invite me back again, we'll be laughing at the idea that everyone's so scared to use it because of hallucinations. We'll be like, Whoa, like we were with email. Remember when email came out? Oh no, we can't put our client stuff in email. It'll destroy the attorney client privilege. And then eventually we trusted email, but we also sent a fax and a hard copy because we didn't trust it completely. And we're the cloud, right? People were like, don't put the stuff in the cloud. And then nowadays, it's almost malpractice. If you don't have a backup in the cloud.

Steve Poor

You are putting me in the Wayback Machine, that's for sure.

Michele DeStefano

Sorry, yeah, we can pretend we weren't around. We We were too young to remember that.

Steve Poor

No, I remember. Never mind what I remember. I remember typewriters and my grandkids don't even know what a typewriter is.

Michele DeStefano

Your grandkids don't even know what a dial tone is.

Steve Poor

Fair point. How has this impacted law schools? You touched a little bit on it, but do you see movement coming in law schools to bring this human element, more like the business school element you're talking about, into their curriculum. Are they still staying? I'm not talking about teaching people AI tools. I'm talking about teaching them the soft skills.

Michele DeStefano

Okay, so I'll be really blunt with you. The only way you get change, for example, in the first year curriculum, is if you get a majority of the tenured professors to agree and they all have different incentives for why they want to keep teaching the course that they've always taught, the way they've always taught it, and why they want to keep what they're doing. And so, it's really hard to get, at least the first year, curriculum to change the required courses, to change first year, and then some of the required ones second and third year. And it's really frustrating. I won't be on a curriculum committee anymore, because we don't ever get anything done. And that's true at a lot of schools. Are there lots of professors that really believe we should be teaching these things? Yes, and there's lots of, I think, schools that are offering these courses, like Law Without Walls, or courses on leadership that are electives but requiring them--I don't know of many that actually have a required course that teaches you those, those skills.

Steve Poor

That's unfortunate, isn't it?

Michele DeStefano

Yeah, it actually, really is, and I don't know how to change it. Believe me, I've tried, and Law Without Walls is my one way of changing. And I feel like we have 45 students from around the world, and then we have another 150 lawyers and business professionals who are very senior. So we got about, I guess I try to change almost 200 people a year, and it's just one year at a time, one lawyer at a time.

Steve Poor

One lawyer at a time, which...

Michele DeStefano

I feel like I'm a vampire and I'm turning people. You know?

Steve Poor

What's the old saying? Change happens one funeral at a time.

Michele DeStefano

Oh, gosh, I that's, that's, I don't know that one, but sounds, sounds familiar? Well, change is always about loss, right? There's that famous saying--I'm spacing on who said it, but you have change. Just remember, when you're trying to lead change, you have to disappoint people at a rate they can bear.

Steve Poor

Well, I've not heard that one. That's great. Yeah, that's right. That's an interesting point, because we've been on this innovation journey, the change journey in the profession, for what feels like forever. The last time we talked, we were dealing with the impact of pandemic, now generative AI, there's a fatigue associated with it. I would think people feeling overwhelmed by the rapidity of the change in the development of the technology. Do you deal with that in Law Without Walls, in terms of how to make your transformation sustainable?

Michele DeStefano

Well, we have a few mottos. One is the expectations that aren't set, are the expectations that aren't met. And we also talk a lot about TNT, and that's a friend of mine, James Batham. That's his saying, T as in tiny and as in noticeable, T as in things. And it's something that I say in Law Without Walls. I also say at Harvard Law School, in my exec ed program and courses that I teach there that pick three things, just three things, and keep them with you. If you try to change too many things at one time, you won't do any of them. You know, like, if you've ever gone to an executive education course, you leave with all these ideas popping out of your head, and I say, Oh, hey, that's great, but just pick three and commit to doing it over the next four months, and then you got to measure and I think it's really important for people to chunk it, just like you have to chunk down a problem into pieces. Otherwise it's overwhelming. Same with this idea of technology and how much we have to change and where we adopt it, when we use it. So the other thing I try to convince everybody, including my friends, is, do you remember so? So I'm assuming you remember Sesame Street?

Steve Poor

I remember Sesame Street. Yes.

Michele DeStefano

Sesame Street actually also runs in Europe, Germany and India, but they have different characters. So one character that doesn't translate outside of the US as well is Snuffleupagus. Do you remember Snuffleupagus?

Steve Poor

I do remember. My girls loved Snuffleupagus.

Michele DeStefano

Okay, and if you might recall, Snuffleupagus was Big Bird's best friend, but imaginary friend. And so when Big Bird needed help, when Big Bird needed a pick me up, when Big Bird needed somebody to help him accomplish something, Snuffleupagus was always there for Big Bird, always. But when Big Bird would try to introduce Snuffleupagus to like Oscar or one of the other characters, no one else could see him because he was his imaginary friend. Where am I going with this? I think of AI as everybody's snuffle uphill. AI should be something that helps us do our jobs better, that makes us realize that, oh my gosh, I have so many things to do, but AI might actually help make me do it better and faster. The other day, something I hadn't done is I just let AI in my Outlook write my email response. It was from somebody I didn't know, and it was a reach out to join some journal and write some article that I get them a lot like, or join a board and it's from. It's a very it's a it's clearly a chain letter that sent to a bunch of professors. I think it's probably a bot. Anyway, I just opened it up and said, see the email below, please be very nice and explain that I'm really thrilled you thought of me, but I'm I'm too packed to have another writing commitment, and it did a great job. I read it, hit send, and while I was doing that, I was responding to another email. So I don't know it's my snuffle. Guess no one needs to know I did that. If it were somebody I knew and it was or a client or whatever, of course, I would spend more time and I would use AI to craft the email better. Here's another way. It's my Snuffleupagus. I'm Italian. I interrupt people. I say I'm blunt. I sometimes don't realize that I'm in someone's face and that I maybe am too forward. So I use AI all the time to just soften my email. I just say, Hey, can you just soften this just a little? Do not change the content. Don't unnecessarily switch words for no reason. Just add in a couple lines to make it softer and suggest any other changes. Because if you're not careful, it'll go and rewrite your whole email, which you don't want it to do. And so that's my Snuffleupagus.

Steve Poor

I'll give you an example of just the other day, I was invited to do a panel discussion, and I got the description, the marketing description, and the list of other panelists. That's all the information that I had. And I put it into Claude, and I said, Give me some back. I did the whole, I'm speaking of this panel. This is the information I have, blah, blah, blah, and it gave me information on the background of the other panelists. They're likely themes that they were likely to strike based. And of course, it was all related, because everything's AI related, the themes they were likely to stress, how they would be differentiated from the themes. I mean, it was, it was amazing.

Michele DeStefano

It was amazing. Have you had it tell you who you are yet?

Steve Poor

Yes, I have.

Michele DeStefano

And wasn't it spot on?

Steve Poor

It got about 90% right.

Michele DeStefano

Yeah. And that's the thing, don't let anyone else use your AI mess it up. It'll suddenly, it'll say, like, why are you watching baseball? You know, I'm like, I don't watch baseball. If I let one of my kids maybe use my AI, because they've asked me for I'm like, No, I'll pay and I've told all my kids they have to, have to. Just last week, I texted all five of them and said, I'm paying for it. Use my credit card. All of you, by the end of the week, you must confirm that you have actually paid for ChatGPT. I only use ChatGPT, suggested that if they want to use one of the other ones, it doesn't matter to me, but I want them to start playing with it. The more you play with it, the more you realize what it can do, and the more you play personally with it, the more you realize how you can use it at work.

Steve Poor

Yeah, we've had the same experience, that one of the focus of adoption we've been having at the firm is exactly that. You say you want to learn how to use it. Don't come to a class. Don't look at the we got classes, we got videos, we got all that kind of stuff. Don't do that. Just load it on your computer and have it put together a menu for dinner tonight. Have it suggest restaurants for the next city you're going to on your travels. Just talk to it, and you'll learn, learn its capabilities, and you'll then begin to figure out how you use it in a business setting.

Michele DeStefano

Yeah. And also something I do, you know you talked about that sandwich, so maybe it's more like a double decker, or what do you call a sandwich that has the multiple layers?

Steve Poor

Club sandwich.

Michele DeStefano

A club or a double cheeseburger. I don't know what I do is then after, if it's really important, and I'm having it help me with something that's strategic, and I'll take it after I've worked with one, then I go use Claude, and then I go use Gemini. And you really can see the differences and get different ideas on what to improve. I actually always check too. I say I had, I was working with a firm, and I had their list of AI tools, because I run workshops on AI to get senior law firm partners to open their minds to how this can change the way they approach their business. And I had the list of the tools, and I had the description from the person at the firm, but I wanted some examples, and I asked chat to put those examples together and to confirm that this is a good description. It made some suggestions for how the tool could be used. Then I went and had put it through Gemini to make sure that chat didn't hallucinate and I'm wrong, because I didn't have time to go test every one of the tools. I knew most of them, but some of them were new. There was one translate when I had not heard of before. So, I think it's really great to use multiple tools.

Steve Poor

It is. It gets complicated, I think for people, because they are trying to remember, what does Gemini do, and what does Claude do best, and how do I do deep research? But you learn it by experience. You learn it by actually rolling up your sleeves. Let me ask you a question about Law Without Walls. How do you scale that? I mean, it's a great program. You're doing wonderful things.

Michele DeStefano

You've asked me the toughest question that you could ever ask me. It's a question I've asked myself every year, because wouldn't it be great if we could have just two a year, fall and spring? And the way we could scale it is, I have to go get an investment from an outside person to help me get a much bigger team, because right now we're three people, and I raise the money to cover both those other two people's salary. So basically the sponsors pay a fee to send their people, but it's three days, and the

major cost is food and drink and technology, because when you come to Law Without Walls, you enter another world, like when you enter the room, there's a theme, and we make sure that you are in the mode to play and to have an open mind and not come with your lawyer suit on. No ties are allowed, actually, and we've made people take them off. So how would? I need more people and more people like me who are willing to lead it.

Steve Poor

So for those of you out there listening that are looking to invest in the future of the profession, contact Michele.

Michele DeStefano

Wow. Okay, checks in the mail for that one.

Steve Poor

So as you look at it, we've been through pandemics. We've been through generative AI, we've been through agentic AI. As you look down the road, what's next?

Michele DeStefano

I think a lot more agentic AI. I think a lot. I think there's going to be jobs we've never thought of before. Like you said, Who's going to project manage and oversee the digital people on your team, and what does that entail? And I think there's going to be different types of jobs. I think we're going to see more need for people that are experts in data and technology, both at in house, legal departments and at firms. And at least this is my hope. My hope is more jobs right now, as a mom of so many young adults, I'm scared for them. My daughter's an unbelievable artist. She's in London Film School. She's fine, right? I'm not worried about her, because I don't think AI has taken her job anytime soon, but all the other jobs I don't know.

Steve Poor

It's a fascinating moment in time, isn't it?

Michele DeStefano

Yeah, she's also a yoga instructor, which I always was supportive of, but now I'm thinking that was brilliant. That said, have you seen what the robots, or the people like robots look in China, they were in the new if I wonder if we're going to have human forms around the AI. I hope not. I want to make sure we keep we know that that's not a human and this is a human. I think that's important.

Steve Poor

I worry about my grandkids in that because I think that I had a conversation with with one of my girls the other day about her 10 year old son. I said, Do you think he'll get a driver's license? And she looked at me like I was crazy. I said, you know, with the way self driving cars are coming, he may not need a driver's license. He may not want a driver's license. Now he's probably old enough that he'll get a driver's license, but my 18 month old granddaughter may not.

Michele DeStefano

She'll be saying, Grandpa, tell me again how you used to be you at your car had wheels, and it would drive on a road. By the time she's that age, you guys will just be flying around and in little airplanes, I think.

Steve Poor

I've been promised that since the Jetsons.

Michele DeStefano

You know, the Jetsons was the most brilliant show alive. If you go back, almost everything that they've had on that show has come to fruition.

Steve Poor

It's one of my I considered a documentary series.

Michele DeStefano

Right? I should go back and watch it, and you've inspired me.

Steve Poor

Oh, it's amazing. It's amazing. Well, Michele, we've run out of time. I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed the conversation. Let's not let five years go by before we catch up again.

Michele DeStefano

Let's not, let's do this in three.

Steve Poor

Okay, I'll put it on the calendar.

Michele DeStefano

Awesome. Thank you so much for having me back.

Steve Poor

Thanks for listening to Pioneers and Pathfinders. Be sure to visit thepioneerpodcast.com for show notes and more episodes, and don't forget to subscribe to our podcast on your favorite platform.