

Pioneers and Pathfinders: Sateesh Nori

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Steve Poor

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

Today we're joined by Sateesh Nori. Sateesh is the chief legal futurist at LawDroid and a senior research fellow at NYU School of Law. His work really sits at the crossroads of justice, technology, and public service. Before moving into legal innovation, he spent years serving New Yorkers as a housing rights attorney and later as a managing attorney at both The Legal Aid Society and Legal Services of New York City. Now, at LawDroid, Sateesh is focused on making sure legal technology isn't just cutting edge, but also credible, ethical, and grounded in real-world needs, especially the urgent need to expand access to justice. Last year, he partnered with Housing Court Answers and the legal tech company Josef to launch Roxanne the Repair Bot, an AI-powered assistant designed to help New York tenants understand and assert their rights when dealing with unsafe or substandard housing conditions. He is also the author of *Sheltered: Twenty Years in Housing Court*, which is a powerful look at the systemic challenges facing tenants, as well as the lawyers who work to serve them.

In this episode, Sateesh shares how LawDroid's tools are helping tenants navigate complex legal processes, why trust is so essential in the future of AI and law, how law schools can better prepare lawyers for a tech-enabled profession, and what he is exploring through his research fellowship at NYU.

I hope you enjoy the listen. Thanks for making the time.

Sateesh, welcome to the podcast. Thank you so much for making some time for me today.

Sateesh Nori

Thank you, Steven.

Steve Poor

I look forward to our conversation. Let's start. You're the legal futurist for LawDroid. Let's set a little baseline for our listeners. First, I'm sure they're familiar with law droid, but for those who may not be, tell us a little bit about what it is and what it's trying to do and its mission.

Sateesh Nori

Absolutely. LawDroid is a legal tech company, and its mission is access to justice. And so one of the things that I've seen in my career as a legal services lawyer is we don't have enough tools. We don't have enough people, we don't have enough funding to help all of those who need that help. And technology is a very simple, straightforward way, and it's now cheaper, faster and better than it's ever been before, thanks to AI. So LawDroid builds stuff that legal aid organizations can use to increase their impact, to expand their missions, and as chief legal futurist, which is kind of a novel job title--

Steve Poor

That's an awesome job title. Are you kidding me? That's wonderful.

Sateesh Nori

Exactly, I hope to come up with some new ways, some creative ideas to implement this rapidly evolving technology into some of the kind of stickiest, thorniest problems that we faced in serving people who have legal needs.

Steve Poor

So, let's talk a little bit about how you you got there. You've spent years of your life working in the Access to Justice space. You've written a book called sheltered 20 years in housing court. I understand you've got a couple of books coming up: Augmented Lawyer: AI in the Future of Legal Practice and AI and Legal Ethics. You've done TEDx talks. Where does the passion for this issue come from? Because it's clear from looking at your background, you have an incredible passion to try to help solve this thorny issue.

Sateesh Nori

Yeah, it really does come from and by the way, I should probably get back to writing now that you've reminded me. But it's much more fun to be on podcasts and talking with folks like you, but you know, where does the passion come from? It's really just me looking for solutions. That's all it's ever been. Is first I became a lawyer to try to help people with their problems. In an abstract sense, people are just dealing with life problems, right? They don't have heat, they can't afford their rent, they have a debt that they can't pay, or someone says they owe and they don't recall ever borrowing that money. They have an immigration issue or benefits issue. People are just looking for solutions. And when I entered legal services and I was working with people who are in these situations, I realized that we as lawyers also needed more solutions. We didn't have kind of a really deep bench of people. We didn't have a lot of tools at hand. The systems were broken, the courts were slow, and they weren't made for people like us or our clients. And so when I was looking around for solutions, I was curious, and I was experimental, and I tried stuff, and before long, I became the expert in some of these things, which is really amazing to me, because sometimes I joke around about being in the tech space, given that I don't really even know how the internet works or how email works, nobody does. Nobody does. Yeah, that's what I like to say. But to know that these things have an application and they're easy to use and they're vetted is really important, and so it's turned me from an experimenter in my own backyard into an advocate and a proselytizer about using technology for these really noble purposes.

Steve Poor

Yeah, it's interesting. You say that if you read any of the analyses of the Access to Justice problem, they almost all say there's not enough human power. You can't just solve this by throwing lawyers at the problem. There aren't enough lawyers, even if the ones that make a lot of money were prepared to give up making a lot of money and then augmenting...

Sateesh Nori

Yeah, and despite that, our solutions are still based on more lawyers. Everything we do is one to one, one lawyer, one client, you know, from intake through to the end of the representation, it's one to one. We haven't been able to scale and we haven't been able to triage. We haven't been able to break out of this emergency room model that we're in. And so while we acknowledge that it's never going to be solved with more lawyers, we haven't changed the system that will require more lawyers. We haven't thought about it in any other way. And that's what we need to do going forward.

Steve Poor

Tell me how you think about it in another way.

Sateesh Nori

So one way to do it is to empower the lawyers. Right. To borrow from Henry Ford, you know, if you ask people what they want, they'll say they want faster horses. And you know, we can build some faster horses like we can make the lawyers better. We can allow people to do legal research faster and write memos and motions more quickly, and that's, you know, very lucrative way to go, because there's a lot

of tech companies out there who are selling legal tools to lawyers and law firms. But I think a better way to go is to build stuff that people can use on their own. People go to Google and Reddit and Tiktok millions of times every day to get legal help, and that's really sad. It's an indictment of our legal system that people feel so alone and isolated and unable to get any real legal help that they're going to self help, so why not meet them where they are, the average person, and build something that they can access on their phones, and then make sure it's working well, and it's got the best information inside it and powered by AI, so that it can answer questions in any language at Any reading level, it's autonomous, so it can work 24, hours a day, seven days a week. Now, how many simple problems can we help solve before they become emergencies that require a court case or legal action or motion? So maybe that's a better way, and I'm leaning towards that more and more despite being a lawyer, I don't think you know, I'm the solution, and everything should revolve around me and people like me. Let's give people the tools in hand that they need, like, you know, an Uber app or a, you know, Instacart or food delivery. You know, people use technology in many different ways.

Steve Poor

So let's pick up on this sort of, this theme of the role of technology in terms of trying to change and break the system of the one on one consultation. What are the human dynamics for that? You spent, you know, a couple decades representing people in housing disputes and litigation and with your sleeves rolled up really, in the in the heat of the battle. Are there dynamics that come into play in terms of the people involved that make that technological solution more difficult to achieve? Or is the fact that we've become so accustomed to calling an Uber that those barriers have broken down?

Sateesh Nori

Yeah, I think first of all, we are trained to think of the courts as a place, and Richard Susskind says the court should be a service, and we can't break out of that mold. And I think during the pandemic, we had a great chance at rebuilding the way the courts work, because we were all working remotely, and it was very easy for us to say, let's stop doing this. Let's go to virtual courts. Let's have courts running at night so people can attend after work. Let's incorporate tools that translate and transcribe and allow people to upload evidence more easily. And instead, when the pandemic ended, we went right back to the brick and mortar courthouses and all the problems that they've always posed for people. For example, there's never enough translators involved. There are accessibility issues. The courtrooms don't have clean water or food available to people who are stuck there all day and can't afford to eat in the neighboring restaurants that are made for lawyers and judges. People bring their kids to court, and yet there's no childcare there to occupy the kids and so on. And so, you know now we can say, why do we still do it this way, when everyone's got a phone and a camera and a screen and they're able to do all other types of things, like order, Ubers, get medical care, order prescription medicines, plan other aspects of their lives. Why can't they attend court? Why can't they help resolve disputes in these very, very simple ways? And so I think that's the opportunity that's before us, and it's the lawyers, it's the judges. It's these institutions that are standing in the way of a lot of this, because they don't like to change. Lawyers, by you know, nature, are pretty risk averse, and if you're asking them to try something this different, first they're going to say, well, how does it affect my bottom line, my income stream, my business model? And the courts are going to say, you know, how is this impacting our structures and our traditions and our processes? And no one's thinking about the average person. So I think this is an opportunity to recenter the individual in the dispute, which is the entire reason the courts exist at all. They exist to help people resolve disputes, not to have a place for lawyers to gather to eat lunch together, and so we have to change that.

Steve Poor

Well, that's always been the way courts viewed to me. So you've identified the opportunity and given logical reasons why, and you also talked about some of the barriers to this in terms of lawyers'

reluctance, judges' reluctance, the nature of the humans in this profession. So how does it change? If the pandemic wasn't enough of an event to cause a change, what do we need to drive the type of change you're talking about?

Sateesh Nori

One of the things that I'm seeing now is AI is growing faster than the internet itself. I've seen some kind of charts showing usage of ChatGPT, and people are using it at a faster rate than they used Facebook or Google even. And so what that tells me is that people at large are going to be ahead of us as lawyers and courts on this, and so we're going to be forced to catch up with where people are and what they expect. And I think that's going to impact the way they pay for legal services, from corporate law all the way down to kind of the mom and pop or the solo practitioner, the way that people bill. I think the billable hour is going to change and people are going to look to new models like subscription services or flat fees. You might see entirely new legal businesses, alternative business structures, maybe a monthly plan like a Netflix account that gives you access to a legal brain powered by AI, that you can chat with and answer any and all legal questions that you might have. So I think it's going to be pulled by the consumer. They're going to drag us, kicking and screaming, into this new era, and it's partially because it's going so quickly. We're not going to be able to stand in the way of what people demand, what they want, and so that could be how it goes. And I would much rather prefer us to lead and make sure that the tools that are out there are vetted and they're accurate and they're not, you know, shady operations that exploit people. But if, if lawyers aren't willing to enter the space, then that's going to happen. It's going to be us reluctantly backing into it because the consumers demand it, or we need to correct for all of the garbage that's out there in the legal space that is eating up our time and energy in different ways.

Steve Poor

I wonder whether there's any professions who have sort of crossed this line that can be a lessons learned kind of thing. I think about telemedicine or or remote radiologists, for example. Or are there professions you look to to say it's happening here that gives me confidence it can happen in my profession?

Sateesh Nori

Yeah, you know, last week, ChatGPT Health came out, and it's going to change the way people access healthcare. I have no doubt in my mind, because as much as we might think, the legal system's broken, the medical system's worse. Yes, it's much harder to get medical care. It's much harder to pay for medical care, even if you can pay you're waiting for an appointment. It's tedious. You don't get the information that you think you might need. You can't make good decisions often. And so ChatGPT Health is apparently going to be a curated health database powered by AI that's going to give people accurate health information, and maybe that's the model, right? If people can trust their health to AI, which they're going to do. A couple of weeks ago, I hurt my back, unloading the dishwasher, of all things, and I needed to know how to get better. And my mother is a rehabilitation doctor. This is what she does for a living. But instead of calling my mom, I went to ChatGPT, and I said, How do I fix my back?

Steve Poor

Oh, so I hope she's not listening to this podcast. That would make her very sad.

Sateesh Nori

Well, I'll share it with her. And why is that? Well, because I don't want her to worry. I don't want to be criticized or judged, and I want a quick answer, right? And I don't want her to drive down to see me or, you know, prescribe something that is painful or awkward or whatever it might be. And so it was

straightforward, simple and quick to get this information and imagine if the information is even better in the future. I think that's a really interesting model, right? Instead of going to emergency rooms and urgent care and waiting on the phone with your health insurer to see if that treatment is going to be covered or that diagnosis is going to be available to you. You might just go to AI, you might, you know, take a picture of a rash on your arm and upload it into ChatGPT, and get a good answer about what it is and how to treat it. So maybe, if that's possible, and it is, and that's what people are going to be doing, how far along is legal going to be? It's going to be right there alongside it, because nothing we do, typically, is life or death in the legal field. And if people are going to put these health issues into AI and rely on that, then why not legal right? It's just logical that they're going to do that. They're going to prefer that.

Steve Poor

I was sitting here listening to you talk, and I was thinking, my first reaction was, how do people know to trust the system? But then I'm thinking, but people go to WebMD and there first. Dr. Google now, which is exactly which is a scary proposition, and if it's a curated thing, maybe that that overcomes some of those problems.

Sateesh Nori

Yeah, and the same is true for legal help. The top place that people go to get legal help is Google, Google JD, if you will, Google Esquire. And so that's already happening, right? People, I think, wouldn't prefer to speak to a lawyer, but they can't afford one, and they don't have time to wait for one, and they may not be eligible for a free lawyer, or that free lawyer is someone like me who's overwhelmed. We don't have enough time, and so they're already doing this. So why not make it better?

Steve Poor

Where do you start? The scope of legal problems that the average everyday person faces is, hopefully, they're zero, but they're also a huge, you know, housing and domestic issues and health issues and debts and everything. If you're talking about building an ecosystem that people can tap into, who does it and where does it start?

Sateesh Nori

So I've started on a couple of ideas that I think are low risk and high volume. And so in the housing context in which I worked for a long time, the issue is repairs. So something like not having heat in the dead of winter like we are in right now, that's something for which an answer is pretty straightforward, like here are the things that you need to do to get the heat back on in your apartment. If you live in an apartment, call your landlord, document the condition, call a city inspector, file a legal case, right? Those are the four things. And if you give people advice on doing those things through an AI bot, the chances are that they can act on that advice and get some result. If the advice is slightly off, there's no harm done. They're in the same situation that they were in before they interacted with the bot, and so that's why I say it's a low risk proposition. We don't want to deal with evictions or deportations or more serious death penalty cases and turn them over to AI at this point, but we can turn over these kind of low risk situations, but they happen to have millions of people, so that gives us the data to build confidence, to make sure we fix errors and misrepresentations, hallucinations and so on. So that's where I've started. I built a bot with some friends called Roxanne AI, and it's live now, and it helps tenants in New York City get questions answered about repairs. I've got rats, I've got bed bugs. My window is broken. What do I do? And you can ask a very specific question and get a step by step response about what to do to resolve that situation. So if we identified a bunch of areas like that that are low risk, I think that's a great place to start to build confidence in these tools and these ways of doing things.

Steve Poor

Two questions based off of that: one, who's the we? And secondly, so you build Roxanne, obviously, coming on podcast is one way to get the word out. But how do you get the word out to potential consumers of the services, so people don't know what's out there. They can't access it. So either question,

Sateesh Nori

yeah, absolutely. So who's the we is, you know, the we can be anybody, but ideally it would be a lawyer like me who has experience. It would be maybe a court system that deals with a lot of these cases. Maybe it's a law school clinic where students could train on working with AI tools and also help people. And so that's an easy one. There's so many people who could do this, and it's never been easier to build these things. It's really, really simple and straightforward.

Steve Poor

Let me follow up on that point, because I take your point that they're easy to build, but isn't one of the problems, sort of the diffused nature of the legal profession, that there's no entity, there's no organization that says, Okay, I look at the problem as a country. And here's our plan for using technology. We need people to build x, we need them to build y, and we lack that structure in the country.

Sateesh Nori

Absolutely, I think, you know, I've thought about setting up a national platform and calling it, you know, the Google for legal help, just a search tool, a search bar, where you can type in any legal problem. And there's something that LawDroid, where I work now, is working on, called law answers.ai, and that's what it aims to be, is like type any question from anywhere, and behind the scenes, it will connect you to the right information. And what if we had people all across the country who are experts, who volunteered their time to make sure the information underlying this machine is the best, the most accurate, the most up to date. Wouldn't that be great, but then who would oversee that? Who would fund it? Is there a national body that we can create to do that? I think that would be ideal. That would be the way to go, but we don't have that yet, and every county, every city, every locality, is struggling to put up their own thing and build it from scratch and make sure that it's accurate. That's the situation we're in now. It's like everybody's just throwing whatever they can throw at this problem. And it really comes to your second question, which is, how does the average person even know these things exist? And that's a real challenge, right? We don't have a marketing budget. We can't compete with Google search results. We can't advertise on the side of busses or on billboards or on TV. And so the only way people know about these tools is if the courts or big legal organizations link to them, if people know about them. And right now, the courts are not sold on this. They're not convinced in most places that these things can work, and so we're stuck. We have tools that work. We have the technology to build more tools, but not enough people even know that they exist.

Steve Poor

Do you worry about the unauthorized practice of law issues embedded in this use of technology?

Sateesh Nori

Absolutely, it's a major barrier. But personally, I think about it from the perspective of the person seeking help, which is, they don't care. They want help, and for us to wring our hands around, well, is this legal advice or legal information? Is not fruitful. The other thing is, there are so many big tech companies practicing law already without law licenses, like I said, Google and Reddit and Tiktok and Facebook and Instagram and anybody and any everybody can hand out legal advice on the internet. So it's a dead letter the law itself, the unauthorized practice of law, and for regulators to start going after

a small tech company like mine for putting out a very helpful, well built legal information bot. I think that is not the right way to go. It's not a good use of resources. And so I think these laws will fade away, and I'm willing to push the envelope as much as I can on delivering what I call actionable legal information to people, which I want to use as the line now between advice and information.

Steve Poor

I'm glad there's folks like you out there pushing, pushing the edge of the envelope. It certainly needs to be pushed without any question about it. Where do you see LawDroid, working in this ecosystem? You've worked across Legal Aid, academia, courts, policy, commissions, startups, and you're now with LawDroid. How do they fit within this ecosystem, and how do they drive change?

Sateesh Nori

I think the initial thing that we can do, and we've been doing already, is to empower and augment the legal aids that exist already: the nonprofits, the courts, the local charities--allow them to do their work better. Some of these places are still using fax machines, if you can believe that in 2026 you know, when I started at Legal Aid 20 years ago, we still had rotary phones lying around the office.

Steve Poor

Most of our listeners don't know what a rotary phone is.

Sateesh Nori

Exactly. My kids have never seen one.

Steve Poor

Unfortunately, I do know what they are.

Sateesh Nori

So we're dealing with like museum pieces masquerading as legal work tools, and so we have a long way to go to bring the legal aid community up to speed and at LawDroid, we want to make that affordable. Right? It's, it doesn't have to cost a lot. It can be very cheap. But then beyond that is, like I said, building stuff for people to use directly. Like, maybe they don't need a lawyer for every type of problem if they can get help early enough. You know, eventually, some say, like all civil problems unaddressed, eventually become criminal problems, right, right, right. Well, I think a lot of life problems become legal problems because people have no answers. So we can give those answers to people through tools that we can build and support and put them out there and figure out a way to get them into people's hands.

Steve Poor

What's the role of law schools in teaching entering people entering the profession about the challenge that society faces, and the role of technology and to empower the new generation coming in to help drive change?

Sateesh Nori

Law schools have a huge role to play. But unfortunately, with law schools and big law it's like the blind leading the blind, and the law students are going to pay the price because law schools are pointing to big law firms and saying, we're going to train students based on what big law demands, and big law is saying we're going to keep doing things the same way we've been doing them as long as we possibly can, until our corporate clients demand something different and so on. It's like a, you know, a circular, you know, firing squad at some point. And the law students need to know how to use these tools. They need to know what their jobs are going to be like. And frankly, I think they need to be prepared for a

reality in which there are fewer lawyers, because a lot of the work that we do is information management, right? It's language. We're working with language and reformulating that language into new outputs. Well, that's exactly what AI does. That's the nature of a large language model. And so what role does that leave for lawyers, for the average lawyer who's comparing two documents, or finding key terms in a huge set of documents, or writing a memo applying facts to law, these are all easy tasks for large language models to do. So, I think law schools have really dropped the ball. They need to accelerate the offering of AI classes teaching the potential of new types of work that are going to arise in the future that we're not even talking about yet, and at most law schools right now, you know, AI classes are elective. They're not mandatory, and students who maybe have an idea of what's coming may sign up for them, but the vast majority of students have no idea how their professional work is going to be impacted by AI. And I think that's a mistake.

Steve Poor

Yeah, you said something in there that's, I want to, want to tease out a little bit where you said the number of lawyers is going to go down. I take your point. But could you also argue that the number of lawyers, you don't need 1000 lawyers to do deals anymore, but if you could repurpose those 1000 lawyers to help people in housing court or in small claims court, so the raw number may not go down, but there may be a shift in where the need for the humans becomes as a result of AI.

Sateesh Nori

Absolutely, that is my greatest hope for the future. Is that we take all the lawyers who are kind of aggregating in big cities, in big law, leaving huge legal deserts across the country, large areas in which the nearest lawyer is hundreds of miles away and or unaffordable to the average person, and we just move people around. And ideally, the average lawyer is going to be happier, because people aren't necessarily happy in big law, right? A certain few are happy, or at least they're rich, and most people are just trying to get to that point. And so maybe, in the ideal way this works out is we don't have less lawyers, because there's still 92% of Americans' legal problems. Low income Americans legal problems are going unaddressed every year, so there's plenty of work to be done. But, you know, lawyers aren't making money doing that work because they're billing by the hour, and so they're all attracted to these big law high paying jobs, and then the other side of that is law school is so expensive, so you can't blame someone from having hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt and then seeking out a big law job as a path out of that. And so the whole thing again, is, you know, it's like the blind leading the blind. We've got to change it, redeploy people, and maybe we don't necessarily need fewer lawyers. We won't be out of work, but we have to think of a different way to work and a different type of client. And you know, for me, it's like everyone could be Atticus Finch, right? Isn't that what you wanted to be when you were little and you read To Kill a Mockingbird? No one said, I want to sit in a conference room on the 40th floor, in a windowless cubicle and look at documents on a screen.

Steve Poor

It's not what I thought I was going to law school to do. That's for sure. Question for just I think it's consistent with what we've been talking about. But the other sort of new position you've taken is, if I've got this right, senior research fellow at NYU School of Law. What does that position entail, and I assume it's consistent with the theme that we've talked about in terms of technology. But what are your research goals?

Sateesh Nori

So that's within the Center on civil justice, and I'm working with an academic there from George Washington law school named Katherine Young and she writes on the Access to Justice crisis more generally, not necessarily, as it relates to technology. And together, I think we can study some of these tools that I've built to see what impact they're actually having, to study new ways that the courts can

work with these tools to see about things like the unauthorized practice of law and ideas like community justice workers. You know, these experimental programs in places like Alaska, where non lawyers, like teachers and social workers are being trained to help people with their legal problems. So there's so much that we can chew on, and hopefully along the way, we can also bring awareness of of this issue to NYU and the law school and other law schools like it and and build out like a curriculum and a philosophy about both access to justice as an issue and the impact of technology on the way that we all work as lawyers. So it's early, but let's that's my hope is that we get to do some of that type of work.

Steve Poor

Those sound like wonderful goals. You've done such wonderful things. Sateesh, it's invigorating to hear someone who's really working to try to change the system on a day to day basis. Thank you for that, and thank you for making time today.

Sateesh Nori

Thank you so much, Stephen. It's really an honor to be on here with you.

Steve Poor

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