Justice Lynn Nakamoto is a pioneering Asian Pacific American lawyer and jurist. In 2011, she was sworn in to the Oregon Court of Appeals, the first Asian Pacific American in Oregon to serve as a judge on any Oregon or federal appellate court and the second woman of color. In 2016, Justice Nakamoto was sworn in to the Oregon Supreme Court—the first woman of color on that court.

Growing up in California, Justice Nakamoto learned a strong work ethic from her parents, and she was the first in her family to attend college. While majoring in philosophy at Wellesley College, she recognized that philosophy likely would not be a practical or satisfying career choice for her. Fortunately, during her junior year at the University of California at Berkeley, she took a class on public interest law taught by an inspirational litigator and co-founder of the San Francisco-based Equal Rights Advocates. The seed was planted: Justice Nakamoto decided to go to law school.

After graduating from New York University School of Law in 1985, she began her career as an attorney in legal services, representing low-income clients in civil and administrative cases, first in the Bronx, New York and then, after moving to Oregon in 1987, at Marion-Polk Legal Aid in Salem, where she was a staff attorney and eventually acting executive director. She later served as a law clerk for U.S. District Court Judge Helen Frye before joining Portland business litigation firm Markowitz Herbold PC in 1989, becoming one of the first Asian Pacific American woman litigators in Oregon.

During her more than 20 years at Markowitz Herbold, Justice Nakamoto focused on employment law and discrimination cases in addition to complex business litigation. A respected litigator, she became a shareholder of the firm after five years and in 2006 became the first Asian Pacific American female managing partner at a Portland law firm, serving in that position until her appointment to the bench.

Upon her arrival in Oregon, she also became actively involved in the community. She served on boards of a number of Portland nonprofit organizations, including the Q Center, a resource center for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, and the Japanese American Citizens League. She has always made a difference in the legal community and worked to advance equal opportunities for others through such groups as Oregon Women Lawyers, the Oregon Asian Pacific American Bar Association, the Oregon Gay and Lesbian Law Association, and the Oregon State Bar Affirmative Action Committee, where she served as chair. Justice Nakamoto also was a founding member of the Oregon Minority Lawyers Association, an organization that is now 26 years old and one in which she remains active. She devoted hundreds of hours to the ACLU in Oregon, working both as amicus counsel and in direct representation cases, primarily on issues involving discrimination based on sexual orientation. She represented the ACLU as amicus in Tanner v. Oregon Health Sciences University (1998), which expanded equal benefits to Oregon same-sex domestic partners and their families.

Justice Nakamoto sought an appointment to the bench and left private practice in part because of her strong belief that the judiciary should reflect the citizenry. During her service on the appellate court, she was recognized as a thoughtful, productive, and collegial appellate judge. Five years later, she was appointed by Governor Kate Brown to join the highest court in Oregon.

Throughout her legal career, Justice Nakamoto has been a trailblazer, advocate, and mentor for many women and particularly for Asian Pacific American women lawyers and lawyers of color. On the bench, she mentors new lawyers and law students and seeks out diverse individuals who can apply for judicial clerkships with Oregon’s appellate courts. She has participated in the Oregon State Bar’s diversity and inclusion program with the goal of recruiting and retaining ethnic minority law students by introducing incoming students to the diverse legal community. At the end of this year, she will become chair of the Oregon Supreme Court Council on Inclusion and Fairness, which works to ensure that all persons have equal access to Oregon state courts and advises the Chief Justice on matters of systemic racial, ethnic, and gender bias in the Oregon Judicial Department. She speaks openly about her experiences as an Asian Pacific American woman and lesbian and is committed to promoting diverse leadership in the bar and the judiciary.

By way of her career path and accomplishments, as well as her public and private support and encouragement of women lawyers and law students, Justice Nakamoto shines as a role model for and inspiration to all women lawyers. Her achievements and commitment to excellence are the hallmarks of a Margaret Brent honoree.