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COURT OF APPEALS

STATE OF NEW YORK

NO. LAW DAY 2026

20 Eagle Street
Albany, New York
May 1, 2026

Before:

CHIEF JUDGE ROWAN D. WILSON
ASSOCIATE JUDGE MICHAEL J. GARCIA
ASSOCIATE JUDGE MADELINE SINGAS
ASSOCIATE JUDGE ANTHONY CANNATARO
ASSOCIATE JUDGE SHIRLEY TROUTMAN
ASSOCIATE JUDGE CAITLIN J. HALLIGAN

Appearances:

Letitia James, New York State Attorney General
Kathleen Sweet, President of New York State Bar Association
Joseph Zayas, Chief Administrative Judge of the Unified
Court system

Chrishanda Sassman-Reynolds
Official Court Transcriber



1 CHIEF JUDGE WILSON: Welcome to the Court of
2 Appeals for the 2026 Law Day celebration. Please remain
3 standing for a couple of minutes. First, to the Pledge of
4 Allegiance, it's my pleasure to welcome Abby Gray (ph.) to
5 lead us in the pledge. Abby is in the seventh grade at the
6 Howard L. Goff Middle School and is the daughter of Ofc.
7 Jessica (ph.) Gray and Lynn (ph.) Gray. Jessica is one of
8 our wonderful court officers here in the Court of Appeals.

9 Abby?

10 Abby does this all the time, so.

11 MS. GRAY: I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the
12 United States of America, and to the Republic for which it
13 stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and
14 justice for all.

15 CHIEF JUDGE WILSON: Thank you, Abby.

16 And for a return engagement, we have fan favorite
17 Lt. Peter Robinson (ph.) to lead us in the national anthem.

18 (National Anthem sung by Lt. Robinson.)

19 CHIEF JUDGE WILSON: Thank you, Lieutenant.

20 Please - - - be seated, everyone.

21 Again, on behalf of the Unified Court System and
22 our cohost, the Office of the Attorney General of the State
23 of New York, I welcome you to the 2026 Law Day celebration.

24 Seated on the bench are my colleagues on the New
25 York State Court of Appeals: Associate Judges Michael



1 Garcia, Madeline Singas, Tony Cannataro, Shirley Troutman,
2 and Caitlin Halligan. Senior Associate Judge Jenny Rivera
3 can't be with us today. She is the court's delegate to the
4 National Conference of Bar Examiners, and her prize is a
5 weekend in Philadelphia. Second prize is two weekends.

6 Alongside me are New York State Attorney General
7 Letitia James, Chief Administrative Judge of the Unified
8 Court system Joseph Zayas, and the President of New York
9 State Bar Association, Kathleen Sweet.

10 I'd also like to acknowledge the presence of the
11 four Appellate Division justices Dianne Renwick, Hector
12 LaSalle, Beth Garry, and Gerald Whalen. And also the
13 presence of our Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Norman
14 St. George, and our - - - and our first deputy, sorry. And
15 our deputy chief administrative judges, James Murphy,
16 Edwina Richardson, and Adam Silvera. And welcome to you
17 all.

18 I'm delighted - - - I'm delighted to see so many
19 of our other colleagues in the judiciary, and I know they
20 will join me in welcoming our special visitors from the
21 coordinate branches of government: Solicitor General
22 Barbara Underwood, First Deputy Solicitor General Jennifer
23 Levy, and Michael O'Regan. And her chief of staff counsel
24 from the Executive Chamber Kenan Kurt.

25 And I think I've got everybody except Taa Grays



1 is the incoming president of the State Bar.

2 So this year, the American Bar Association has
3 chosen "The Rule of Law and the American Dream" as the
4 theme for Law Day with - - - and given us the explanation
5 that the rule of law ensures all Americans have the ability
6 to fulfill their dreams.

7 When almost anyone in the United States talks
8 about opportunity, success, or hope, the phrase the
9 "American Dream" comes up again and again. For most, it's
10 associated with the idea of upward social mobility, with
11 the belief that through hard work and self-determination,
12 regardless of one's social origins or humble beginnings,
13 anyone can rise from rags to riches.

14 For some, the phrase even evokes a checklist of
15 what it means to be successful in America: a home with a
16 lawn, a white picket fence, two cars in the garage, and 2.5
17 children. You might think the phrase: "the American Dream"
18 originated around Horatio Alger's time just after the Civil
19 War, or maybe, in the Gilded Age, but it's actually not
20 quite that old.

21 The phrase was coined by James Truslow Adams, a
22 Brooklyn-born author and historian, in his 1931 book "The
23 Epic of America". Writing at the start of the Great
24 Depression, Adams defined the American Dream as:

25 "That dream of a land in which life should be



1 better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity
2 for each according to his - - - his ability or achievement.
3 It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but
4 a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman
5 shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they
6 are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what
7 they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of
8 birth or position".

9 For Adams, the American dream was fundamentally
10 not about wealth, but about equal opportunity. The promise
11 that our governments will work to ensure that all persons
12 can reach their highest potential, no matter who they were
13 or into what circumstances they were born.

14 Adams further recognized that the American Dream
15 was a dream by Americans, but not just for Americans. As
16 he explained, "The American dream that has lured tens of
17 millions of all nations to our shores in the past century
18 has not been a dream merely of material plenty, though that
19 is doubtlessly counted heavily" - - - it has been much more
20 than that.

21 "It has been a dream of being able to grow to the
22 fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the
23 barriers which had slowly been erected in the older
24 civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had
25 developed for the benefit of classes, rather than for the

1 simple human being of any and every class".

2 The American dream, as Adams understood it,
3 offered both a working model for other governments to
4 emulate and a welcoming home for people born elsewhere who
5 believe strongly in its promise.

6 The values animating Adams' definition go back to
7 the founding, though the founders would not have used the
8 word dream. Eighteenth century Americans used the word
9 "dream" pejoratively to refer to impractical foolhardy
10 fantasizing for romantic ideas that would never come true.

11 In The Federalist Papers, for example, Alexander
12 Hamilton urged Americans to abandon the idle theories and
13 dreams that several states would coexist peacefully without
14 a strong federal government uniting them.

15 But no matter what words we use to describe their
16 political philosophy, the founders, like James Truslow
17 Adams, envisioned a society in which every person had an
18 equal opportunity to reach his or her fullest potential.

19 The Declaration of Independence, 250 years old
20 this year, recognized that all men are created equal. That
21 government's role to protect the rights of all to life,
22 liberty and the pursuit of happiness was paramount. Ninety
23 years later, Abraham Lincoln said that the great principle
24 or idea that kept this confederacy so long together was
25 that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence, which

1 gave promise that in due time the weight would be lifted
2 from the shoulders of all men. And by "weight" he meant
3 the systemic injustices, especially slavery, that prevented
4 equal opportunity for all people.

5 President Lincoln went on to say, "if this
6 country cannot be saved without giving up that principle, I
7 would rather be assassinated on the spot than surrender
8 it".

9 Slowly, however, that principle, written by the
10 founders and extolled by Lincoln, lost its centrality to
11 the popular conception of the American Dream. After World
12 War Two, fueled by the deprivation of the Great Depression
13 and wartime, by booming birth and income and home ownership
14 rates, by the rise of television advertising, consumerism
15 became central to the national ethos. A good consumer was
16 a good citizen. Purchasing a patriotic act that helped the
17 American economy recover after decades of - - - of war and
18 depression. The American Dream became inextricably tied to
19 ideas of material wealth, even as civil rights leaders
20 sought to recenter the dream on justice and equality.

21 Dr. King grounded his incomparable oration at the
22 1963 March on Washington as a dream deeply rooted in the
23 American dream that one day this nation will rise up and
24 live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these
25 truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal".

1 As we approach the 250th anniversary of the
2 Declaration of Independence, the American Dream continues
3 to encompass both promise and challenge. The founding
4 promise of full participation in our democracy for all
5 Americans, and the challenge that over the past two and a
6 half centuries, we have approached that promise haltingly,
7 with unsteady and faltering steps.

8 That is where the rule of law comes in. Our laws
9 are what enfranchise or exclude. They are what can
10 transform the American Dream from a fantastical myth into
11 genuine opportunity: the Constitution's three-fifths
12 clause, Dred Scott, Plessy v. Ferguson, Minor v.
13 Happersett, Korematsu, Baker v. Nelson. When we have used
14 the law to disenfranchise and exclude, we have further
15 delayed fulfillment of our country's founding promise and
16 rendered the American dream hollow.

17 By pairing the American Dream and the rule of
18 law, the American Bar Association exhorts us to set our
19 sights on ensuring that the rule of law continues to evolve
20 in the direction of equity and inclusion.

21 In 1931, James Truslow Adams described The
22 American Dream as an opportunity for a better and fuller
23 life, which could mean a hundred different things for a
24 hundred different people. For the hundreds of us gathered
25 here today and the hundreds of us watching online and who

1 will watch later, each with our own experiences and areas
2 of expertise, I'm sure we could think of more than a
3 hundred ways - - - some big, some very small - - - in which
4 the rule of law could better enable all New Yorkers to
5 achieve their American Dream. And the task of envisioning
6 and implementing those big and small ideas is the duty of
7 every one of us.

8 My hope for this Law Day is that we recommit
9 ourselves and each other to the original definition of the
10 American Dream by recognizing that our - - - recognizing
11 our communal duty and opportunity to fortify governmental
12 systems that protect the freedom to choose one's path, to
13 express one's identity, and to pursue happiness on one's
14 own terms.

15 On the July 4th, 1854, Henry David Thoreau
16 admonished his audience: "The law will never make men
17 free. It is men who have got to make the law free".

18 That task remains before us and requires our
19 constant effort. Let's get to it.

20 As part of the Unified Court System's ongoing
21 efforts, two years ago, we created the Office of Statewide
22 Civic Engagement. This year, the office ran its second
23 annual civics essay contest. High school students from
24 across the state were invited to write an essay proposing a
25 new amendment to the United States Constitution. Finalists



1 from - - - there were a lot of entries. Finalists from
2 each judicial district were then invited to orally defend
3 their proposals at a local courthouse before a panel of
4 three Unified Court System judges.

5 126 students from eleven counties submitted
6 essays. The statewide essays were selected, based both on
7 the written essay and the oral presentation, and I'm
8 pleased to announce the winners today. In third place,
9 Cara Wise (ph.) of Saratoga County in the Fourth Judicial
10 District. Cara proposed - - - Cara proposed an amendment
11 to limit the President's pardon power, including by
12 requiring approval by two-thirds of the United States House
13 of Representatives for any pardon.

14 In second place, Clara Berke (ph.) of Queens
15 County in the Eleventh Judicial District. Judge Zayas was
16 not on the panel of judges. Clara proposed an amendment to
17 place term limits on the United States Supreme Court
18 justices. Sort of like the ones we have here.

19 In first place, Sanayah Muhammad (ph.) of Kings
20 County in the Second Judicial District. Sonayah proposed a
21 Youth Equal Rights Amendment, which would include
22 protections against physical discipline of youth in the
23 home and at school.

24 Congratulations to Cara, Clara and Sonayah, whose
25 essays will be posted on the website of the Office of



1 Statewide Civic Engagement on the court system. And
2 congratulations to all of the students who took the time to
3 consider creative ways that might strengthen our democracy.

4 Finally, I would like to announce the winners of
5 the Law Day Art Contest. As in previous years, our Office
6 of Justice Initiatives, in partnership with the Historical
7 Society of New York Courts invited high school students
8 from across New York State to participate in art contest
9 inspired by the American Bar Association's Law Day topic.

10 This year we received thirty-two submissions from
11 fifteen counties, many of which are on a rotating display
12 outside of the courtroom.

13 Today, I'm also delighted to announce the
14 statewide first, second, and third place prize winners, as
15 determined by a panel of art judges, not law judges.

16 In third place, "Reaching for the Stars" by
17 Jordan Merz (ph.) of Kings County in the Second Judicial
18 District. The piece depicts five outstretched hands
19 reaching for the stars on the American flag. Jordan wrote:
20 "In our nation, I believe that everyone should get equal
21 chances, equal opportunities, and equal treatment. With my
22 artwork, I wanted to show a variety of Americans all
23 getting the same chance to reach for the stars to get their
24 American Dream".

25 In second place, "Liberty for All" by Spencer



1 Sweet (ph.) of Rensselaer County in the Third Judicial
2 District. Spencer wrote: "A group of diverse children
3 stand at the foreground, amazed by an American flag that
4 serves as an inspiration to them. They represent a future
5 that is equal under the law. Behind them, the U.S. Capitol
6 and Lady Justice serve as the background and foundational
7 pieces to the American experience. The Constitution also
8 serves as a reminder that the law stems from the consent
9 and wishes of the people that guide our country to be the
10 equal and free place that it should be".

11 And in first place, "Justice for All" by Nana
12 Wada (ph.) of New York County in the First Judicial
13 District. Nana's art depicts the Statue of Liberty as Lady
14 Justice, holding two level scale plates in which a colorful
15 array of New Yorkers sit together. The artist's statement
16 reads: "The rule of law means that all people are equal,
17 where no one is higher or lower than the other, and are
18 free to live with freedom. So my art is to represent a
19 justice scale, which is a symbolic representation of
20 fairness and how each side is at the same level, showing
21 equality between all the people".

22 The three pieces of artwork are beautiful and
23 inspiring in their own right, and I'm doubly moved that
24 they all identified and connected to the original meaning
25 of the American Dream: that all people are created equal,

1 should have equal chances to live and grow under the equal
2 protection of the rule of law.

3 Congratulations to Nana, Spencer, and Jordan, and
4 to all the students who participated in our Law Day Art
5 Contest. I also thank the Office of Justice Initiatives
6 and the Historical Society of New York Courts for
7 encouraging our youth to think about and contribute to our
8 democracy in beautiful and creative ways.

9 And it's now - - - it is now my pleasure and
10 privilege to turn the program over to the Attorney General
11 of the State of New York, Letitia James.

12 MS. JAMES: I want to congratulate all of those
13 honorees. Our future looks very bright.

14 Of course, I want to thank Chief Justice. It is
15 truly an honor and a privilege to be with all of you today
16 as we gather to celebrate Law Day.

17 Chief Justice Wilson, the Administrative Judge
18 Joseph Zayas; Solicitor General Barbara Underwood; the
19 First Deputy Jennifer Levy, the chief of staff from my
20 office, Michael Regan, Kathleen Sweet, the president of the
21 New York State Bar Association, members of the court of
22 appeals, and of course, all of the members of the bench and
23 of the bar.

24 As lawyers this day, it allows us to promote
25 understanding and appreciation for the rule of law. This



1 year's theme, "The Rule of Law and the American Dream",
2 reminds us that the promise of this country is sustained by
3 laws that are fair, and a legal system that ensures that
4 the rights and privileges and opportunities of all are
5 protected.

6 As the chief legal officer for this great state,
7 my office and - - - and the office, and the
8 responsibilities of all of those in the Office of the
9 Attorney General, is to defend and enforce the laws of this
10 great state. But what we have witnessed recently are
11 extreme overreaches and deliberate violations of our
12 Constitution by the federal government.

13 The - - - the withholding of federal harms - - -
14 of - - - of federal funds from the State has caused
15 devastating harm to our state and its residents. Funds
16 necessary to ensure that parents can feed their children,
17 and that citizens can rely on the protection of law
18 enforcement, and so much more.

19 These funds also amount to the building blocks of
20 the American Dream by helping families find stability,
21 access opportunity, and build a future with dignity. These
22 actions have been done wholly without the permission of
23 Congress, a coequal branch of our government. The
24 Constitution gives the power of the purse to Congress. The
25 Constitution vests - - - vests in Congress all legitimate



1 power to appropriate funding.

2 And any attempt to weaken that power is an
3 affront to the separation of powers. And it's not just the
4 funding that Congress allocates to New York that's at risk.
5 We're seeing unprecedented efforts via executive orders to
6 exert total federal control over our elections.

7 And just this week, the United States Supreme
8 Court gutted the Voting Rights Act further disenfranchising
9 millions of Americans and eliminating a pillar of our
10 democratic system of government that civil rights heroes
11 fought and died to secure. Access to the ballot box is the
12 very foundation of the American Dream. Without a voice in
13 our government, there is no pathway to opportunity, no
14 accountability, and no justice.

15 We're also seeing unprecedented efforts to
16 undermine the rights of immigrant communities. These are
17 families who came to this country in pursuit of that same
18 American Dream. They do not represent the worst of the
19 worst. They are entitled to the same due process, dignity,
20 and protection under the law.

21 My friends, if the oaths we took when we passed
22 the bar are to mean anything to any of us, then we must
23 stand firm against any and all attacks on the rule of law
24 and on the judiciary. This is not a partisan issue. It is
25 a fundamental - - - it is fundamentally a question of right



1 or wrong, the fraying of our democratic norms. And we
2 cannot sit idly by and let the fabric of our democracy be
3 destroyed.

4 We cannot rationalize this behavior, these
5 efforts, or shy away from our responsibility. We cannot
6 normalize this concentration of power. We must withstand
7 the tremors of our time and defend the law, the
8 independence of the legal profession, and our nation's
9 future.

10 In defending the rule of law, we are fighting to
11 ensure that everyone in our country, no matter their
12 station in life, no matter their background, can build a
13 better life for themselves.

14 That, my friends, is the American Dream. And
15 that, my friends, falls upon the shoulders of all of us in
16 this room and those who are listening, and those young
17 people who competed in that great contest. It's up to us,
18 to all of us. And as lawyers and as individuals who
19 believe and defend the rule of law each and every day, it
20 is ours to defend.

21 Thank you.

22 MS. SWEET: Good morning, everyone. Thank you
23 for those inspiring words. And thank you, Judge Wilson,
24 for inviting me here today. It's an honor to speak to all
25 of you and in this hallowed room.



1 It's an honor to be with the judges of the Court
2 of Appeals. I'm reminded that our past president, Hank
3 Greenberg, described them just a few days ago as the
4 greatest court of last resort in the land. Couldn't agree
5 more.

6 Thank you also for the privilege of being with
7 the presiding justices of the Fourth Department, including
8 my home, Fourth Department, PJ Judge Whalen. Our Chief
9 Administrative Judge Zayas, always great to see you and be
10 with you. I will never forget our first meeting.

11 We met at the Queens County Bar Association event
12 approximately a year ago, and we are very different body
13 types, and he did a jump squat into a chair from flat
14 footed onto a chair, and we were talking eye-to-eye. For
15 months I thought I had hallucinated that. And last week at
16 the Armenian Bar Association he received a well-deserved
17 award, and I went over to him afterwards to congratulate
18 him. And I questioned whether that was, in fact, a
19 hallucination, and he said, no, I did it.

20 We are also joined today by, as you heard our
21 strong, courageous, and embattled Attorney General Letitia
22 James. It is really humbling to be with you, so thank you
23 for joining us today. And thank you also for attending our
24 150th anniversary gala in January. That was really a treat
25 to have you with us.



1 The list of additional judges, lawmakers,
2 leaders, dignitaries that are here is too long for me to
3 call out everyone. But thank you all for making this event
4 a part of your day and the celebration a part of your work.

5 Also, congratulations to the Judith S. Kaye Award
6 honorees. Justice Kaye - - - Judge Kaye was a role model
7 for me and I know she would be proud of each of you.

8 I look - - - I also look forward to recognizing
9 our pro bono award winners from across the state this
10 afternoon at our bar center, a few steps from here.

11 Well, you've heard other people's take on the Law
12 Day theme: The Rule of Law and the American Dream. Our
13 country, as you well know, celebrates 250 years in
14 existence this year, and the New York State Bar Association
15 is celebrating its 150th-year anniversary.

16 Before I go any further, I also want to
17 congratulate and welcome, in just thirty days, our incoming
18 president of the New York State Bar Association - - -
19 historic choice - - - our first woman of color - - - who
20 will lead our 55,000 members, Taa Grays.

21 Each of us can reflect on the milestones that
22 we've achieved personally, with the benefit of living in
23 this country and all that it provides. And we can feel
24 civic and professional pride in our achievements and the
25 achievements of lawyers and judges and the court system.



1 But how does the rule of law impact the American Dream?

2 Well, here's how I see it. When people come
3 here, they are not guaranteed wealth or success or even
4 well-being. But because of the rule of law, they are
5 promised and guaranteed fairness, comfort, and certainty
6 that they will be seen equally and treated equally in the
7 eyes of the law. And in return, new citizens take an oath.

8 Almost everyone in this room has taken an oath,
9 whether law enforcement, military, attorneys, judges,
10 elected leaders. We all took an oath. And the taking of
11 the oath has become almost mechanical it's so routine. It
12 is at the end of a long road of achievement and struggle,
13 or at the beginning of a new position. And the things we
14 say when we take an oath have become almost rote, even
15 though they are so important. In 2026, how will we live up
16 to our oaths? How do we do our part to preserve the
17 American dream? Well, one way is to hold ourselves and our
18 national leaders to those oaths.

19 There's a couple examples of how the bar
20 association in particular has tried to do that. Many of
21 you know that over the last year and since early 2025, the
22 most powerful law enforcement positions in the country have
23 been diluted, distorted, and weakened by installing
24 loyalists who are unvetted, unqualified, and inexperienced
25 without Senate confirmation and barely a wink toward the



1 necessary independence of the Department of Justice.

2 The administration and the Attorney General have
3 failed to carry out their oaths, which is to faithfully
4 discharge their duties and the laws of our country.

5 Consider how federal judges and U.S. attorneys
6 were appointed just ten years ago. They were interviewed
7 by senators; investigated thoroughly by the FBI, by the
8 Department of Justice; full days of interviews by the
9 American Bar Association Standing Committee on the Federal
10 Judiciary. A recommended or appointed or nominated lawyer,
11 their firm, their friends, their family, their neighbors
12 were all interviewed. Qualifications and temperament,
13 ethics and experience mattered.

14 And if such a lawyer was fortunate to get to a
15 hearing before a Senate Judiciary Committee, someone like
16 Senator Lindsey Graham may ask such a nominee what does it
17 mean to live in a rule of law society? I wish I could say
18 that when the question was posed to me, that brilliance
19 poured out of me. But ten years ago, what I said was
20 hardly inspirational or memorable. It was like the oath
21 we've all taken. We meant it, but we took it for granted.

22 A collective commitment to respect the rules for
23 the sake of a civilized society. At the time, those were
24 words uttered by my fellow nominees at the judiciary
25 hearing - - - judiciary committee hearing. I did not, I

1 confess, fully appreciate what we were all saying. We took
2 it for granted.

3 So what happened? Elections have consequences.
4 The Senate never voted on my nomination or any of my fellow
5 nominees. It was a thrilling experience and despite the
6 disappointment, I came away grateful that it was such a
7 thorough, rigorous, serious process. I came to respect
8 federal judges and U.S. attorneys even more.

9 Lawyers and judges are the ones who give life to
10 the promise of the rule of law and our society. It is the
11 foundation, but it is no longer a given. And the American
12 Dream does not and cannot exist without it.

13 As lawyers and as judges, we owe a special
14 nondelegable duty to the rule of law. It cannot defend
15 itself. It is not self-executing. We, together, are the
16 keepers of that flame. And more than any other segment of
17 society, our daily bread is due process, fair play, decency
18 with one another, respect for diversity, and respect for
19 our adversaries. When the rest of our citizenry goes numb,
20 is overwhelmed, or confused by political noise, we as
21 lawyers - - -

22 She's speaking out in defense of the rule of law.

23 - - - we as lawyers must stay engaged and tuned
24 in. We must speak out for the Constitution. We cannot sit
25 back and hope or wait to see who else might do it. It's up



1 to us. The rule of law and the basis for the American
2 Dream are codified in our Constitution, which was debated,
3 drafted, and enacted by lawyers. It will be lawyers who
4 save it. And it will be lawyers who preserve the American
5 dream.

6 Thank you so much for the honor of speaking to
7 you today.

8 JUDGE ZAYAS: So I am so tempted to address that.
9 I'm short. I'm short. And I just want to assure our
10 incoming president that I will never do that to her. And
11 it wasn't that we were having a discussion. It was
12 somebody wanted to take a photo, and I did not want to be
13 at President Sweet's elbow. Well, you know, she's a former
14 basketball player. And so that's what that was about. I
15 wanted to take a picture where we sort of had the same - -
16 -

17 I did one day, however, say - - - I did, however,
18 say one day I keep wondering whether or not I could take a
19 layup and actually get the ball in the basket. And she
20 said, I don't think so. Against her, never going to
21 happen. But good to see everyone.

22 So each year on Law Day, we honor our court
23 system employees from across the state who exemplify the
24 characteristics that we most value in public servants.
25 These individuals are not only effective in the workplace,

1 but they are also pillars of their communities.

2 The awards that they - - - they receive bear the
3 name of one of our most influential, consequential, and
4 admired chief judges, Judge Judith Kaye. It is my
5 privilege to present these awards today.

6 The first category of awards, exemplary work
7 performance, really speaks for itself. We recognize
8 individuals who go above and beyond each day, who are
9 innovative and creative, who are selfless colleagues, and
10 who make our courts more efficient, effective, and
11 compassionate places.

12 Perhaps the most fitting way to introduce David
13 Nocenti, OCA's counsel, is to acknowledge that he would
14 probably prefer to be anywhere, anywhere else right now
15 rather than being recognized in this setting. And I mean
16 that as a compliment.

17 Dave is the consummate team player. He doesn't
18 want to be the center of attention. He just wants to do
19 his job well, and just as importantly, to support his
20 colleagues so they can be successful in their roles.
21 Because ultimately, what drives Dave is the desire to serve
22 New Yorkers by helping make their government work more
23 effectively for them.

24 Dave has devoted almost his entire legal career
25 to serving others. As an assistant U.S. attorney, as



1 counsel to Queens - - - Queens Borough President, the
2 Attorney General, two governors, and for fourteen years as
3 executive director of Union Settlement, the oldest and
4 largest social services organization in East Harlem.

5 When the Chief Judge and I assumed our roles in
6 2023, we knew that Counsel for the Office of Court
7 Administration was a key appointment. When we interviewed
8 Dave, we knew we had lucked out and that we were fortunate
9 to have someone with Dave's breadth of experience to help
10 guide some of our most important decisions.

11 I'm sure that many of you here today have
12 benefited from your own consultations with Dave and his
13 staff, who effectively function as in-house law department
14 for the court system and provide sound advice on a wide
15 range of issues.

16 Counsel's Office is also responsible for
17 advancing OCA'S legislative program, and Dave has
18 strengthened that process, too, including by putting the
19 right people in place to lead those efforts, which has
20 resulted in the passage of more of our program bills and
21 improve relationships with the legislative and executive
22 branches.

23 On a personal note, I want to say that Dave has
24 been tremendously valuable - - - a tremendously valuable
25 sounding board for me on so many issues. He really is a



1 counselor in the best, most complete sense of that word.
2 He's knowledgeable about the law, of course, and the
3 legislative process. But he's also strategic, pragmatic,
4 and operates with unimpeachable integrity. Also, as I
5 said, he cares a lot about New York and New Yorkers.

6 It is a - - - a pleasure to work with him each
7 day and to present him with this award. Dave, please come
8 up.

9 Our next award for exemplary work performance
10 goes to Shannon Perro. Ms. Perro serves as a court
11 attorney referee, and special counsel for town and village
12 courts in the Seventh Judicial District. In addition, she
13 serves as a town justice in the town of Greece, bringing
14 the perspective of a sitting judge to the operational
15 support she provides across the local courts of the
16 district.

17 Ms. Perro was responsible for creating the first
18 centralized arraignment part, or CAP, in the Seventh
19 Judicial District, and since then has been the driving
20 force behind the - - - the opening of CAPs in every county
21 in the district, culminating last year with the launch of
22 the eighth and final CAP in Monroe County.

23 The latest project was a vast and complex
24 undertaking, integrating nineteen town and village courts,
25 the Rochester City Court, and a wide network of stake - - -

1 stakeholders to handle thousands of cases with consistency
2 and speed.

3 Ms. Perro did the hard work herself, putting in
4 twelve to sixteen hours a day, hiring and training four new
5 staff members, and staying late each night when the part
6 first opened. She continues to manage all eight CAPs,
7 remaining on call twenty-four/seven for inquiries from
8 judges, police agencies, and court personnel.

9 The impact of this - - - the CAPs has been
10 significant. Since the first one opened in 2018, they have
11 facilitated well over 50,000 arraignments, nearly 10,000 of
12 them in Monroe County alone, during its first year of
13 operation, ensuring that each individual's constitutional
14 right to counsel at their first appearance is honored.

15 Judges and senior staff in the seventh district
16 attribute these results to Ms. Perro's perseverance,
17 competence, and commitment to the mission of our court
18 system. They describe Ms. Perro as a leader who builds
19 consensus where barriers once stood, who is available at a
20 moment's notice to support 162 local judges and clerks, and
21 who meets even the most sensitive matters with poise,
22 professionalism, and kindness. These are the values we
23 prize, the values that Judith Kaye championed.

24 Ms. Perro, for your extra - - - extraordinary
25 leadership, your steadfast commitment, and your exemplary



1 performance and service to the people of the State of New
2 York, it is my honor to present you with the Judith Kaye
3 Service Award. Please come forward to accept your award.

4 Our next recipient is the - - - in the exemplary
5 work performance category is someone I know very well
6 because she worked in Queens. Nancy Samms, a principal
7 court reporter in the Supreme Court Queens County criminal
8 term.

9 Over a career spanning more than thirty-five
10 years, Ms. Samms has demonstrated exceptional
11 professionalism, leadership, and commitment to the mission
12 of the Unified Court system. For the last three years, Ms.
13 Samms served as supervising court reporter, consistently
14 model - - - modeling the qualities of a strong leader. She
15 has been a trusted mentor and a positive influence for
16 colleagues throughout the Court.

17 In a time of staffing constraints in the court
18 reporter title, Ms. Samms has maintained - - - has remained
19 resolution-oriented, ensuring that our judges have the
20 support they need to administer justice in Queens County,
21 day in and day out. Her dedication extends beyond the core
22 responsibilities of her role. Ms. Samms has volunteered in
23 planning and executing equal justice programs within the
24 court, and has mentored our summer interns, helping the
25 court to invest in the next generation of court



1 professionals and to reinforce a culture of dignity,
2 access, and service.

3 Ms. Samms has now retired from her position. In
4 fact, just yesterday was her last day of service to the New
5 York State court system. She concludes a distinguished
6 career that has touched countless court proceedings,
7 families, and lives.

8 Through this award, we honor a career of steady
9 excellence and express our appreciation for decades of
10 service that has been precise, dependable, and quietly - -
11 - quietly transformative.

12 Ms. Samms, for your exemplary work performance,
13 your leadership under the pressure, and your decades of
14 faithful service to the Queens County Supreme Court and the
15 Unified Court System, we extend our deepest gratitude and
16 heartfelt congratulations. Nancy Samms, please come up and
17 accept your award.

18 Our final award for exemplary work performance
19 goes to Isidorus Giakoumis (ph.). Did I get that right?

20 Or Steve, as he is known in the Supreme Court,
21 Queens County Civil Term where he has worked for thirty-
22 three years. Mr. Giakoumis started his career as a court
23 aide and worked his way up through a series of promotions
24 to his current position as management analyst in the
25 court's fiscal department. Mr. Giakoumis plays a key role

1 in ensuring that the Queens Civil Term facilities are set
2 up and running smoothly.

3 He is involved in far too many things to mention
4 here, but they include scaffolding projects, roof repairs,
5 elevator maintenance, and the management of television and
6 movie production crews using the courthouses as film
7 locations. He is the point person who coordinates the
8 various departments out - - - various compartments and
9 outside agencies conducting these projects.

10 He also supervises the fiscal department staff
11 and oversees the process of moving judges into new
12 chambers. As chief administrative judge, it was truly
13 gratifying to read the many, many letters submitted in
14 support of Mr. Giakoumis' nomination to receive this award.
15 He was described in glowing terms by both the justices and
16 nonjudicial staff at Queen's Civil Term.

17 They called him a, quote, "troubleshooter, ever
18 present, and the trusted go-to person to address any
19 concerns regarding courthouse facilities". They emphasized
20 the pride he takes in preserving the character and
21 condition of our courts in Queens, as well as the personal
22 attention he gives to each and every person working with
23 him.

24 Mr. Giakoumis was also touted by his colleagues
25 as a role model who leads by example. He gets to work

1 every day, early every day, stays late, and rolls up his
2 sleeves to work side-by-side - - - side-by-side chief - - -
3 side-by-side with the staff he supervises. And to top it
4 off, Mr. Giakoumis is described as personable, good-
5 natured, patient, and always bearing a smile.

6 It is quite clear to me that Mr. Giakoumis
7 approaches all of his duties with professionalism,
8 virtuosity, and the greatest care. For this, he is an
9 exemplary public servant and a true asset to the court
10 system. Please come up and accept your award.

11 The next category in this year's Judith Kaye
12 Service Awards is community service and humanitarian
13 pursuits. This award recognizes the achievements of court
14 system employees who have devoted their efforts and
15 abilities to endeavors that benefit the community as a
16 whole.

17 This year's reci - - - recipient in the community
18 service category is Arenas Thomas (ph.), whose
19 granddaughter was the beautiful toddler that has been
20 helping us out this year.

21 Ms. Thomas joined the unified court system in
22 1994 as an office typist in the Kings County Clerk's
23 Office. She has received several promotions throughout her
24 long career and currently serves as a principal court clerk
25 in Supreme Court Kings County Civil Term.

1 In this role, Ms. Thomas supervises the help
2 center at the courthouse at 360 Adams. Our help centers
3 perform a crucial function. They assist litigants who are
4 not represented by an attorney. Although our court staff
5 cannot give legal advice, they provide pro se litigants
6 with helpful procedural information to help them navigate
7 our court system.

8 Filing or defending a lawsuit can be frightening,
9 stressful - - - a stressful experience for anyone, let
10 alone an unrepresented litigant. Ms. Thomas goes above and
11 beyond in helping them. I am told that prior to Ms.
12 Thomas' work in the help center, scared and anxious
13 litigants sometimes caused disturbances. Court - - - court
14 security would often have to respond to these incidents.
15 Ms. Thomas' patient approach and her calming presence have
16 nearly eliminated these occurrences.

17 According to Administrative Judge Genine Edwards,
18 it is a common sight while walking through the courthouse
19 to see litigants approach Ms. Thomas to thank her for
20 assisting them in - - - in the past.

21 It is evident from his Thomas' job performance
22 and - - - that she cares about the - - - the welfare of
23 others and believes that everyone who enters the doors of
24 the courthouse should be respected, receive the necessary
25 attention, and have their day in court.

1 In recognition of Ms. Thomas' dedication to
2 helping the public, we bestow upon her this well-deserved
3 award. Ms. Thomas, you can come up at this time.

4 Our final award recognizes acts of heroism. This
5 award honors employees within our court system who have
6 risked their own personal safety to protect others and
7 serve the greater good.

8 This year, we collective - - - we are
9 collectively honoring a group of thirteen court officers
10 who were called upon to confront the sort of situation that
11 we pray never happens, but unfortunately, sometimes does.

12 In June of last year, a man entered the criminal
13 courthouse in Manhattan armed with a knife and launched
14 what appears to have been a planned attack on our court
15 officers. The first officer - - - the - - - the first
16 officer, the assailant confronted, Court Ofc. Ralph DeVito
17 was cut - - - was cut twice on the face, knocking him down.

18 The assailant then charged at another officer,
19 Malik Sylvester (ph.) cutting Ofc. Sylvester's face and
20 neck and attempting to stab him several times in the back.

21 Another of our officers, Michael Oliver (ph.),
22 rushed to his colleagues' assistance. So did Sgt. Edward
23 Calderon (ph.). They were able, along with other officers,
24 to bring him down, though the assailant continued to
25 struggle and injured Sgt. - - - Sgt. Calderon.

1 Ultimately, the officers were able to sue - - -
2 subdue the assailant, disarm him, and place him under
3 arrest. Thankfully, they were able to do so without
4 discharge - - - discharging their weapons and before any
5 members of the public or any other court employees or
6 judges were attacked.

7 Each of - - - each of the officers we are
8 honoring today acted with extraordinary bravery and
9 selflessness. They acted quickly, decisively, and - - -
10 and without regard for their own personal safety, to
11 protect their colleagues and the public. That day they
12 exemplified the best of the law enforcement profession.

13 But what is also extraordinary is that notwith -
14 - - notwithstanding the physical injuries they sustained
15 and the trauma they experienced, most of these officers
16 were back at work within a few weeks, staffing the same
17 posts in the courthouse lobby where they'd been attacked
18 and - - - on that morning in June.

19 As Administrative Judge Amaker eloquently put it
20 in nominating these officers for this award, that decision
21 speaks volumes about their character, resilience, and
22 commitment to the mission of ensuring a safe and secure
23 courthouse for all who enter.

24 In honor - - - in honoring these thirteen
25 officers today, I want to extend my deep gratitude to all



1 of our court officers throughout the state who protect our
2 courthouses each and every day.

3 Unfortunately, in recent years, we have seen an
4 alarming increase in the number of threats made against
5 judges, and in some horrific cases, actual acts of violence
6 have been perpetrated. All of this is very troubling for
7 the judiciary, but I know I speak for all of my colleagues
8 on the bench when I say that we rest easier at night
9 knowing that we have the best court officers in the country
10 protecting us.

11 Sgts. Edward Calderon, Damian Clark (ph.),
12 Carmelo Correa (ph.). Court officers Jaime Alvarez (ph.),
13 Michael Carrieri (ph.), Ralph DeVito, Chelsea - - - Chelsea
14 Marcus (ph.), Joseph Pasburgh (ph.), Nigel Riley (ph.),
15 Malik Sylvester, David Toews (ph.), Matthew Wells (ph.),
16 and Michael Oliver (ph.), please come up to accept your
17 award.

18 CHIEF JUDGE WILSON: Thank you all for attending.
19 That concludes the 2026 Law Day celebration. I hope to see
20 you all in 2027.

21 (Court is adjourned)

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C E R T I F I C A T I O N

I, Chrishanda Sassman-Reynolds, certify that the foregoing transcript of proceedings in the Court of Appeals of Law Day 2026, was prepared using the required transcription equipment and is a true and accurate record of the proceedings.



Signature: _____

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