

## **2021 Law School Access to Justice Conference Fighting Systemic Racism: Law School and Community Partnerships**

### **Welcome and Opening Remarks**

Helaine Barnett: Good morning. I am Helaine Barnett, Chair of the New York State Permanent Commission on Access to Justice. Welcome to the 2021 Law School Access to Justice Conference, convened by the Permanent Commission and co-hosted by Columbia Law School.

This virtual conference brings together deans, faculty, and law students from New York's law schools. In attendance are representatives from each of New York's 15 law schools, along with legal services providers, community organizations, representatives of the Judiciary and the private bar from New York and elsewhere.

We are looking forward to an informative and productive day exploring the extremely important theme of the role of law schools and community partnerships in addressing systemic racism.

This year we are grateful that Columbia Law School agreed to be the host and we are so pleased that the dean of Columbia law school, Gillian Lester, is with us today.

Dean Lester became Dean on January 1, 2015 after a distinguished career in academia, previously having taught at such institutions as Berkeley Law School, Harvard Law School and UCLA School of Law.

She is a leading authority on employment law and policy and has published widely. Dean Lester also serves on the board of The Legal Aid Society of New York. I would now like to invite Dean Lester to present her welcoming remarks.

Gillian Lester: Thank you Helaine. Good morning, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to the New York State Permanent Commission on Access to Justice's 2021 Law School Conference and my great pleasure, as dean of Columbia Law School, to be co-host, the law school to be co-host of this year's conference. Even though you

aren't on Columbia's campus, I'm no less thrilled that we are able to serve and to welcome you to this important convening.

I want to begin by expressing my appreciation for those who've been involved in planning and executing this event. The New York Court of Appeals, in particular Chief Judge Janet DiFiore. The New York State Permanent Commission on Access to Justice, its chair, Helaine Barnett, and Staff Counsel Barbara Mulé and Rochelle Klempner. The Planning Committee, which includes representatives from law schools from across the state. The panelists and presenters, including our keynote speaker, ACLU President Deborah Archer, and all of those of you who are speaking in workshops today.

And I'll especially thank those of you from Columbia, my colleagues, and to the Columbia team who helped in coordinating this event—Erica Smock, Michael Patullo and members of our AV team.

The topic that was chosen for this year's conference, fighting systemic racism through partnerships between law schools and their communities, is an incredibly important and timely one.

For those of us who teach the law, we know that a core part of our mission is to help our students understand legal practice as a deeply human endeavor, one that requires lawyers to spend time getting to know and empathizing with their clients, as well as to advocate for broader change where they see systemic injustice.

In law school, one of the most important ways students can learn about these important functions of the profession is through work in our local communities. I'll just share that at Columbia, and I know that many other law schools around the state and around the country have really worked hard to deepen our partnerships with community organizations.

For us at Columbia, these are organizations in Harlem and Upper Manhattan, in particular with businesses, nonprofits and agencies that provide assistance to underserved populations.

To give you examples of the work we've been doing at Columbia, we've expanded our Community Development and Entrepreneurship Clinic which helps local entrepreneurs to set up their businesses as legal entities. We've grown our experiential offerings in Harlem and Washington Heights, including offering a new externship with the Harlem Legal Aid Office.

We've made available grants to members of our community, to help them to launch projects that will deepen ties with our surrounding neighborhoods. Many student groups that have come together with ideas that we've lifted up and supported. And we've committed to increasing awareness of opportunities to purchase goods and services from local businesses.

These efforts are part of our broader anti-racism agenda at Columbia Law, which includes many other things, diversifying our faculty, promoting inclusive teaching and learning, and supporting students from underrepresented communities.

I suspect that today's discussions will introduce us to new and innovative approaches to law school/community partnerships, many that we have not yet thought of ourselves.

And I'm thrilled to have the chance to hear more about them. I know that you'll be inspired and energized by the workshops and panels and I look forward to bringing some of that knowledge back to Colombia, as I'm sure many of you will to your own institutions.

So, thank you again for joining me today. It's my great pleasure to turn the spotlight on Helaine Barnett who will provide additional words of welcome on behalf of the Permanent Commission before Deborah Archer delivers the keynote address.

Helaine Barnett: Thank you Dean Lester for that very informative report. It is now my distinct pleasure to introduce the Chief Judge of the State of New York Janet DiFiore.

Chief Judge Janet DiFiore began her tenure as the Chief Judge of the State of New York on January 21, 2016. In the past year, she

has had to guide the New York State court system, the largest in the country, through the pandemic, facing unprecedented challenges and requiring extraordinary leadership. In the midst of the pandemic, racial unrest and turmoil intensified in our country and much of the focus was on racism in our society and the justice system.

In response to those issues in New York, Chief Judge DiFiore decided to examine all forms of racism, bias, and disparate treatment, which led to the appointment of a special advisor and a commitment for change. She will tell you more about that shortly.

New York is so fortunate to have Judge DiFiore at the helm with her extraordinary energy, creative thinking, and commitment to the role of the judiciary. It is with great admiration and gratitude that I ask you to join me in welcoming the Chief Judge of the State of New York, Janet DiFiore.

Hon. Janet DiFiore: Welcome to our 2021 Law School Access to Justice Conference, "Fighting Systemic Racism: Law School and Community Partnerships."

I want to start by thanking Helaine Barnett, the Chair of our New York State Permanent Commission on Access to Justice, the sponsor of today's conference. And the Commission's Members and staff for your strong leadership and for the enormously impactful work you have done to expand access to justice across the state.

The scope and depth of that work is truly impressive, but what the Commission does each year to convene a conference focused on the role of law, schools and law students and expanding access to justice is singular and unique, and I think we all agree, deserve special recognition as it reflects our collective belief in our commitment to the proposition that training and preparing future lawyers to be public citizens who care about access to justice and who care about equal justice is something that goes to the very heart of the educational mission of our law schools.

And I want to express my appreciation to the deans and faculty and attendance this morning for the many efforts and initiatives you have developed and put in place to instill in your law students, the understanding that their professional obligations as lawyers run deep. And that, at the heart of our obligation is a commitment to service to others, and the pursuit of justice and equity in their communities.

And I'm mindful that the active participation of all 15 New York law schools in today's conference sends a very important message, a message of unity and the fight against systemic racism and bias, these efforts, taking place, not just in our law schools, but in our justice system and our society as a whole.

We all know and understand that our courts and the justice system cannot function without the public's trust and confidence in our work. Our legitimacy and authority in the public eye depend on many factors, but none is more important than the public's belief in our commitment and ability to ensure just and equal treatment for every person who comes through the courthouse doors, regardless of who they are, or where they come from in life.

And that is why we, as judges and lawyers, as deans of our law schools law professors and law students and all others who respect the fair administration of justice have a solemn and continuing obligation to take a leadership role in fostering meaningful diversity and inclusion within our institutions and making certain that everything we do is characterized by fairness, dignity, and by respect for others.

Acting on these imperatives last June I turned to nationally respected attorney and former Secretary of Homeland Security Jay Johnson. And I asked him to conduct an independent no-holds-barred examination of our court system to help us identify and eliminate from our institution any and all forms of racism, bias, and disparate treatment.

I know that you will be hearing today from Edwina Mendelson, our Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives, who I've asked to lead the day-to-day efforts to implement Secretary

Johnson's equal justice recommendations, and she will bring you up to date on the tremendous amount of work that is underway to change our institutional culture, including the commitment I have made on behalf of the entire court system to achieve a policy of zero tolerance for bias and discrimination in our courts.

In addition to the urgency of maintaining public trust and confidence in our commitment to equal justice, there is an equally important reason for convening this conference. And that is to reaffirm the powerful role that lawyers have played in our nation's history to balance the scales of justice and to balance the scales by empowering disenfranchised individuals and underserved communities, providing them the services and the support they need to assert their civil rights and challenge unjust laws and practices that perpetuate systemic racism. And who better to speak to the role of lawyers and law schools as agents for equity and justice than your keynote speaker, Professor Deborah Archer, President of the American Civil Liberties Union and Co-Faculty Director of the Center on Race, Inequality and the Law at NYU Law School. And I have been informed that Professor Archer will be sharing her important perspective, addressing the historic opportunity that we have before us to challenge, to inspire, and to train a whole new generation of lawyers to lift up their communities and help them to join in the fight against systemic inequalities in our society.

I am certain you will be inspired by the professor's words and by her wisdom and I do want to commend the deans, administrators and faculty of our law schools here in New York for all you are doing to combat racism and discrimination within your institutions; educate and sensitize law students to issues of systemic racism; improve diversity and inclusion within the legal profession; and recruit and train the next generation of public-spirited lawyers who will help our nation live up to its stated ideal of equal justice for all.

In closing, I again want to thank Helaine Barnett and the members of the Commission for once again focusing our attention on exactly the right issues at the right time.

And a special thank you to Matthew Diller, Dean of Fordham Law School for all of the time and the thoughtful effort he's devoted to planning and organizing this year's law school conference.

I look forward to the findings and recommendations that will flow and emerge from today's proceedings and to continuing the work we're doing together to ensure access to justice and fair and equal treatment for all. Thank you again for your participation today and for your leadership and your commitment. Our best wishes for a terrific, terrific conference.

Helaine Barnett:  
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Thank you, Chief Judge for those inspiring remarks. Since she

Chief Judge of New York State, Justice DiFiore's impact on equal access to justice has been profound.

We thank her for recognizing the leadership role of law schools and fostering meaningful diversity and inclusion and combating systemic racism and bias and set the stage for the rest of our conference today.

Now I'd like to say a few words about what's ahead for us today.

Our keynote speaker as you've heard is Professor Deborah Archer President of the American Civil Liberties Union and a professor at NYU Law School.

She will be followed by the opening plenary, which is entitled "Creating the Collective Capacity for Systemic Change" which will discuss how to work on systemic change through collective capacity building and other collaborative impact models.

Next, we will have two sessions of concurrent workshops, as you can see from the conference agenda each workshop will focus on particular aspects of this important subject: of fighting racism through partnerships.

Our objective is to learn from the experts, so that the permanent Commission can develop specific recommendations regarding the

role of law, schools. Our previous eight law school conferences resulted in especially useful and constructive recommendations.

You may be interested to know that at last count, we have more than 400 registrants for this year's conference and of that number 66% are first-time attendees.

In addition to the large contingent from New York, we have registrations from 18 other states, the District of Columbia, Australia, and Brazil.

We welcome those of you who are new in joining us, whether a new or returning attendee, each of you has a unique perspective, based on your background and experience that we want to hear, and we welcome your input and helping shape this year's recommendations to the Chief Judge.

We look forward to a very engaging, timely, productive, and focused conference.

I would like to thank Michael Patullo, Erica Smock, Luis Bello, and Adrian Davila from Columbia Law School for providing planning and technical assistance.

Also, thank you to the members of the Conference Planning Committee, who are listed on the 2021 Law School Conference web page on the Permanent Commission's website, and the distinguished speakers and our plenary session and workshops, all of whom have invested substantial time and effort to ensure a meaningful conversation.

And a very special thank you to Barbara Mulé and Rochelle Klempner, Counsels to the Commission, and the technology support volunteers for their invaluable assistance, without which this conference would not be possible.

And, of course, thank you to all of you who are participating today, for your interest and focusing on this very important issue of law schools and community partners fighting systemic racism.



Finally, I would like to thank Dean Matthew Diller, Dean of Fordham Law School and Chair of the Permanent Commission's Law School Involvement Working Group, for his expert guidance and outstanding leadership of this, and all, of our Law School Conferences.

Dean Diller will now introduce our keynote speaker.