

DAILY NEWS

Uptown

Judge returns to Washington Hts. roots for swear-in to state Supreme Court

Justice Mauel Mendez tabs Young People's Chorus of New York City to perform during his swearing-in ceremony at Isabella Geriatric Center

BY [DOUGLAS FEIDEN](#) / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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CHRISTOPHER HALL/CHRISTOPHER HALL PHOTOGRAPHY

State Supreme Court Justice Manuel Mendez with members of Young People's Chorus of New York City, during his swearing-in at Isabella Geriatric Center earlier this month.

A trailblazing Dominican-American judge elected in November to the state Supreme Court could have picked any location in the city for his swearing-in ceremony — so he chose a Washington Heights senior center along with some majestic music provided by a local youth choir.

“This is my neighborhood, my community, my home, and these are the people who helped get me elected,” Justice Manuel Mendez told the Daily News. “I cannot think of any better place for an induction.”

As one of a handful of Dominican-born judges in the nation, Mendez said he wanted to turn the Dec. 17

ceremony into a community celebration with entertainment provided by the melodious Young People's Chorus of New York City.

And that's exactly what happened as more than 375 judges, politicians, district leaders, seniors, friends, family members, business owners, community activists and other local residents packed the Isabella Geriatric Center at 515 Audubon Ave. for the moving tribute.

Serenading them were more than 25 adorable and musically gifted kids from the YPC, ages 8 to 12, who opened the program with a soaring rendition of the national anthem and closed by singing and dancing a spirited merengue number.

Associate Appellate Division Justice Rolando Acosta, who in 2002 became the first Dominican-born Supreme Court justice in city history, swore in the 51-year-old Mendez, who first came to America with his family in 1970 at the age of 9.

They settled in the Heights, but Mendez later returned to the Dominican Republic and was admitted to the bar there in 1989 — before coming back to the city to practice law and later winning election to the Civil Court bench in 2004.

Eight years later, he won his Supreme Court seat.

Mendez said that, traditionally, judges have been inducted in their courthouses, but recently, to cut back on overtime and maintenance costs, they've been holding the ceremonies in various outside locations.

"There was only one choice for me, and that was my home community in Washington Heights," he said with pride.

dfeiden@nydailynews.com



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State Supreme Court Justice Manuel Mendez delivers remarks during his swearing-in ceremony at Isabella Geriatric Center at 515 Audubon Ave.