

Law Day 2020

Virtual Ceremony – May 1, 2020

Chief Judge Janet DiFiore

Welcome to Law Day 2020.

For the past 30 years, the Court of Appeals has been honored to co-host the annual Law Day ceremony with the Attorney General for the State of New York. And this year, we are pleased to continue our tradition, albeit in a very different way.

As you know, around the country countless public events have been canceled or postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic, and while it is very disappointing that this year we are not able to gather in person at beautiful Court of Appeals Hall to commemorate Law Day, we couldn't quite let go of this wonderful annual event.

So, after speaking with our Attorney General, Letitia James, and our State Bar President, Hank Greenberg, we agreed, without hesitation, that Law Day had to be celebrated. Our message to the public, particularly this year, must be clear and unwavering: our justice system remains strong and resilient; our respective institutions are working together to ensure access to justice; and we are supporting and upholding the rule of law, standing together against the disruption of the moment.

And so, while we are disappointed by the physical distance between us, we are delighted and proud to continue our annual tradition.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

As part of our tradition, we begin the Law Day Ceremony with our Pledge of Allegiance. And to lead us in reciting the Pledge, this year we have invited one of our outstanding court professionals, Regan

Williams, a Senior Court Clerk assigned to the New York City Criminal Court in lower Manhattan. Regan has continued reporting to work every day, along with so many of her dedicated colleagues across the state, to provide essential support for our virtual court parts. It is because of folks like Regan that we are able to deliver justice safely, and effectively in the midst of this pandemic.

[PLEDGE]

Thank you, Regan.

NATIONAL ANTHEM

And now, to lead us in our National Anthem, we have invited New York State Court Officer Sergeant Jessica Hernandez, from Bronx Supreme Court, Criminal Term. Sergeant Hernandez and her uniformed colleagues around the state have put themselves at great risk during this public health crisis, serving on our front lines so that we

can keep our courts open to serve the public and carry out our constitutional mission.

[NATIONAL ANTHEM]

Thank you, Sergeant Hernandez.

CHIEF JUDGE'S REMARKS

Each year, the American Bar Association selects a theme for Law Day events around the country. This year's theme, "Your Vote, Your Voice, Our Democracy: The 19th Amendment at 100," invites us to reflect on the historic contributions of the pioneering suffragettes, women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who started a movement for equality and justice, which began right here in our own state with the 1848 Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention, which ultimately led to the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote.

While the pioneers of women's suffrage would certainly be pleased with the progress of women in American society, including the record number of women – 131 – serving in the current Congress and in the New York State Judiciary, where women now make up 42% of our bench, they would undoubtedly be surprised, and even disappointed, at the electorate's woeful lack of civic knowledge and the low voter turnout we experience, year after year, across our nation.

Last year, on Law Day, President Greenberg and I pledged to hold a joint Convocation designed to harness the power of the legal profession to work with educators on strengthening civic knowledge and engagement among our young people. The idea of engaging students was overwhelmingly well-received, and the planning began. But, of course, the 2020 Convocation was not to be. The COVID-19 emergency forced us to postpone the Convocation, but I assure you, that as soon as it is safe and practicable for us to do so, we will fulfill our commitment and implement our planned program to have lawyers

and judges collaborating with local educators across the state to engage our students on civics and improve their understanding of the courts, the justice system, the rule of law and the power we have as voters to guide our own destiny.

The infiltration of this hideous virus into every aspect of our lives has underscored for all of us the importance of voter knowledge and participation in shaping our country's future. Our upcoming elections will be critical to the nation's destiny. We will be called upon to elect competent national and local leaders who will be charged with guiding our recovery and implementing the safe, smart and effective policies necessary to restart our stalled economy and prevent future outbreaks.

As important, we must also make sure that no American is disenfranchised by the pandemic, and that every person is able to safely cast their vote. The legal profession will certainly have an important role to play in ensuring that our election laws and rules are updated; that our election systems are prepared to count every vote;

and that our elections are free from outside interference. And, of course, our courts will be open and working to peacefully settle disputes and faithfully interpret and apply our laws and our Constitution.

As members of the Bar, we each swore an oath to uphold the Constitution. We understand well that we are the guardians of our democracy, and that it is up to us to lead the way:

- In preserving and defending our cherished right to vote;
- In helping New Yorkers recover from the economic damage of this devastating virus; and
- In working collaboratively, across all sectors of the Bar and among our many and diverse justice partners, to keep our courts open while protecting the health and safety of our judges, court staff, lawyers, litigants and the tens of thousands of individuals who, until the recent past, physically came through our courthouses every single day -- and whose legal needs are sure to intensify in the aftermath of this crisis.

And while this may be a Law Day unlike any other in our history, our constitutional mission is unchanged. It remains constant. It is now more important than ever that we continue providing access to justice and upholding the rule of law for the benefit of every American.

And so on this singular Law Day 2020, I want to thank everyone who has done their part: everyone who has done their part to help us keep our courts up and running; everyone who has done their part to provide legal services to individuals in need; everyone who has done their part to stand in defense of the legal and constitutional rights enjoyed by all of us; and everyone who has done their part to help and support each other as we work together, as New Yorkers, to get our state, and our nation, moving forward to a “new normal.”

So, on behalf of the entire New York State Unified Court System, we thank you and express our deep and abiding gratitude for your service.

**INTRODUCTIONS OF ATTORNEY GENERAL JAMES AND STATE BAR
PRESIDENT GREENBERG**

Now, the Judiciary, of course, is not the only institution charged with protecting rights and upholding the rule of law. The Attorney General for the State of New York, Letitia James, our State's Chief Legal Officer, has been hard at work throughout this pandemic: advising our state government on difficult public health issues, enforcing consumer protection and labor laws and serving as the guardian of the legal rights of all New Yorkers. It is with great pleasure that I welcome Attorney General James to our virtual Law Day ceremony.

[REMARKS BY ATTORNEY GENERAL JAMES]

Thank you, Attorney General James.

Our next speaker has done an absolutely extraordinary job representing the New York State Bar Association as its President. Responding to a most challenging call to service, this President, on behalf of his members, has set in motion an amazing pro bono response designed to assist more than a million unemployed and vulnerable New Yorkers suffering from the economic fallout of the pandemic; and along a parallel track, he has worked effectively to position the Association to provide struggling lawyers and law firms with comprehensive coronavirus resources to help them, and their clients, get through this unsettling time. It is my privilege to introduce our State Bar President, Hank Greenberg.

[PRESIDENT GREENBERG'S REMARKS]

Thank you, President Greenberg.

CONCLUSION

Ordinarily, we would now proceed to the awards portion of our Law Day ceremony, with Chief Administrative Judge Larry Marks publicly recognizing the members of our professional staff who have gone above and beyond the call of duty during the course of the year and made notable contributions to the courts and our communities.

And while we are not able to conduct our awards presentation this year, I do want to take this opportunity to express our special appreciation, and praise, for the extraordinary work of our nonjudicial staff, including the Chief Clerks, Court Clerks, Court Officers, Technology staff and many other dedicated court professionals who worked countless hours, under very difficult conditions, to create a virtual court system almost overnight -- a system that has enabled us to deliver justice services all across the state, without putting the public, or our judges and staff, at risk of harm.

And a special word of thanks goes out to our Administrative, Supervising and trial judges for their leadership and excellent work in adopting and implementing the virtual court model that is delivering justice safely and effectively. And to our Presiding Justices and their colleagues on the Appellate Division, as well as my colleagues at the Court of Appeals, for quickly following suit and adopting virtual operations to ensure the continuity of our vital services.

Finally, we owe a great debt of gratitude to our Chief Administrative Judge, Larry Marks, for leading our day-to-day operations and guiding our court system through this very challenging period. Judge Marks has performed his responsibilities with a steadiness of purpose, and a degree of competence and optimism, that has been inspiring to watch. Thank you, Judge Marks.

And thank *you* for tuning in to this year's virtual Law Day, and for all that you are doing on a daily basis to keep our justice system strong and resilient. Together, we will continue to preserve our democratic

values and demonstrate to the world that our commitment to the rule of law is unshakeable.

So, until we next convene, hopefully in person at Court of Appeals Hall for Law Day 2021, please take care, be well and remain disciplined in keeping yourself, and those around you, safe.

Thank you.