

*The State of the
Judiciary 2026*

Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson



Monday, February 9, 2026

12:00 PM

Court of Appeals Hall

Albany, NY

*Sketch for
Clock*

Court of Appeals. Albany N.Y



Front Cover: H.H. Richardson, architect, sketch of Grandfather Clock at the New York State Court of Appeals, c. 1883.
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The State of the Judiciary 2026



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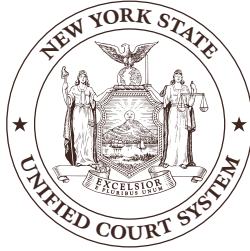
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Opening Remarks

Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson

In 2015, the Commission on Judicial Nomination interviewed me for the position of Chief Judge. As was her custom, Chief Judge Kaye, who then chaired the Commission, came to speak with me before walking me in for my interview, and asked me to promise her that if I were selected to be Chief Judge, I would prioritize Family Court. I assured her I would.

I didn't become Chief Judge then, or a Judge at all. A lot of time has passed since that conversation. Time is precious to all of us, but especially so in childhood, when so much of our selves is formed. It is less than three years since my leadership team and I became temporary stewards of the Unified Court System. During that time, we have been working hard to fulfill the promise I made to Chief Judge Kaye.

We could not have done so without the very substantial support of the Legislature and Governor, who have created 29 new Family Court judgeships around the State. The increase in our funding has allowed us to appoint 10 new Family Court Magistrates in New York City and increase nonjudicial staffing in Family Courts around the State by 21% in the past two years, which has reduced backlogs substantially, though not enough. We have gone from 16 court-based Children's Centers in 2024 to 26 today, and they now all operate full time. Our pending Budget Submission includes funding to support five new Family Court mental health treatment parts.

Our Judicial Institute, led by Dean Kathie Davidson, has ramped up its training for our Family Court Judges, Support Magistrates, Court Attorney Referees, and other Family Court personnel. The New Judges School and the Judicial Summer Seminars include an extensive slate of Family Court-focused sessions about both substantive law and courtroom practice, including trauma-informed judicial decisionmaking. Standalone programming in the past two years has featured presenters with lived experiences and addressed emerging and interdisciplinary issues—from exploring best practices for working with transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse youth in court, to the growing intersection between family law and federal immigration law.

We have also sought to instill a problem-solving ethic in our Family Courts, created the position of Statewide Coordinating Judge for Family Court Matters, and replaced a hodgepodge of committees touching on various aspects of families with a Permanent Commission on Justice for Families. The Permanent Commission has established six Action Groups that meet monthly to formulate plans to improve the treatment of Family Court participants in the

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following subject areas: Article Ten and Foster Care, Child Support, Custody and Visitation, Intimate Partner Violence, and Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Justice. Among other objectives, the Permanent Commission will evaluate and operationalize the recommendations in the forthcoming report from the Family Justice Initiative, a collaboration between the Unified Court System, the Governor’s Office, and the Center for Justice Innovation.

Please do not think that my leadership team and I are doing the fundamental work to improve the Family Court experience. In reality, it is the Judges and staff who have been working energetically and creatively to address the complaints about Family Court that have persisted for decades. I offer one small example.

In Rochester, a group led by Family Court Supervising Judge Stacey Romeo and Judge Van White built and supplied a “little library” in the children’s center. They did this all on their own initiative, and I have a couple of photos to show you. Here’s some of the group partway through construction of one of their creations. And here’s a couple of views of the final product. I hope you noticed the broad smiles of the UCS personnel; their creations should produce even broader smiles from the children and parents arriving at Rochester Family Court.



The underpinning of Chief Judge Kaye’s request to me was that Family Court is simultaneously the most important of our courts; the most difficult court for judges, lawyers and the parties; and the most under-resourced of our courts, with the possible exception of Housing Court. It is the most important because children are involved, and the potential to provide support and change a life for the better is at its peak. It is the most difficult for many reasons, the greatest of which is that with children, time is precious, and delay carries an outsized cost. It is the most under-resourced of our courts because, as a society, we have treated bad childhood behavior as fault of the child and found it shortsightedly efficient to mimic the criminal justice system in our child welfare systems—and, more broadly, as a society, we have consistently neglected those living in poverty.

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In 2024, the New York State Senate issued a report entitled *The Crisis in New York's Family Courts*. While acknowledging that the “overwhelming majority” of Family Court cases involve allegations of neglect that “center on murky issues that are traceable to poverty,” the report described our Family Courts as “overburdened and under-resourced, plagued by untenable caseloads, overworked staff, and a legacy of dysfunction.” None of this was the intent in creating Family Court. The New York State Family Court was established in 1962. But several pieces of legislation dating back to the early 1900s focused on protecting neglected children and rehabilitating those who had broken the law. In 1922, New York followed the national movement and established a Children’s Court, which separated children’s cases from the traditional criminal court system. One family law professor, in her recent book, writes that the early family courts’

purpose was considered preventive or rehabilitative in order to achieve what came to be called *personalized justice* for the child.... By talking with the child “and by acting directly upon the child,” the court would find a solution ... Judges would solve the problems that brought these children and their families to court.

But our Family Courts have yet to fulfill their potential to become true “problem solvers” dispensing “personalized justice.” The principal fault does not lie with our Family Court Judges or court personnel working in those courts: they are attempting, in high stress, high stakes situations, to do what they can without sufficient resources and with problems for which courts are not, in many cases, the best governmental institution to help families move forward safely and healthily.

If we had a magic wand we should use it to eliminate Family Court entirely by eliminating all the problems families have. But that isn’t possible, because the root causes of the distress that families, parents and children have are not created by the courts, but are fomented elsewhere. I offer a few data points to help explain what our Family Courts have to deal with every day.

Among the 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico, New York has the tenth highest poverty rate: 14 percent of New Yorkers are living below the poverty line. The situation is worse for children: nearly three quarters of a million New York children, or 19 percent, live in poverty. Only nine states have a higher child poverty rate. And the trend is going the wrong way: in 2019, child poverty rates in New York were at the national average; since then, child poverty has decreased nationally, but not in New York. In Buffalo, Syracuse and Rochester, between 40 and 46 percent of children live in poverty.

The conditions that bring many families to Family Court—mental illness, physical illness, violence, poor health and nutrition, inadequate medical care, housing instability, substance abuse—are highly correlated with poverty. As summarized by a New York State

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Bar Association report, “the majority of [Family Court] cases (75% in the most recent national statistics) involve the inability of parents, for reasons of poverty, to meet the basic physical or health needs of their children or to provide minimally consistent and stable parenting.” Those problems are not made by Family Court, and cannot best be addressed by Family Court, but at present, it falls on Family Court to adapt from treatment of symptoms to treatment of the underlying ills, best as we can.

It is not that we, New York State, cannot afford to address the problems created by poverty: measured by per capita Gross Domestic Product, New York ranks first among all states. If the 50 states were independent nations, New York State would be the tenth largest economy in the world, larger than Canada, Brazil, Russia, Mexico, Australia, Spain and South Korea. In that regard, one tremendous step that should assist low-income families from avoiding some of the issues that bring them to Family Court is the Governor’s just-announced \$4.5 billion plan for Fiscal Year 2027 to ensure statewide universal pre-K and, in New York City, to fund free childcare for 2- and 3-year-olds. Imagine the stress that a poor family faces; maybe the family is a single mother trying to hold down a job that barely covers food and housing while also caring for her young children. Free and accessible childcare gives that mother the ability to further her education or advance her career knowing that her children are safe and being educated and cared for, which gives the whole family stability and the promise of a better future.

Several longitudinal studies also demonstrate the unequivocal benefits of high-quality preschool: significantly higher high school graduation rates, enrollment rates at four-year colleges, and median monthly income in adulthood; and lower rates of early pregnancy and incarceration. Early childhood education even led to significantly higher midlife civic participation. A 2021 whitepaper studying the long-term effects of universal preschool states that “[c]ost/benefit analyses suggest that [public preschools] are among the most cost-effective social programs on record.”

In the short run, we need to expand the resources at Family Courts’ disposal so that they can spend the time necessary to treat each child’s and each family’s situation with individual, tailored care, and so that they have genuinely helpful outside resources with which children and families can safely be partnered. In the long run, what will help us shrink the population needing Family Court are substantial investments not directed to the judicial system, but investments such as those proposed for universal childcare, which attack the root societal causes driving people into Family Court. The need for the improvement of assistance outside of the courts—both before and after families find themselves in court—is even greater than the need for the enhancement of court resources.



In the meantime, the court system’s goal is to provide not just robust judicial resources that can help get families to a place of stability and safety, but also to partner with New York’s other branches of government and local communities to provide support for our families’ needs before, during, and after their time in Family Court.

As in years past, the most important parts of today’s program will not come from me, but from five New Yorkers who have been litigants in New York State Family Court—some as parents, some as children, one as both.

This was a difficult program to assemble. Family Courts handle cases that touch on the most intimate, and often most sorrowful and traumatic periods of life. One mother from Onondaga County prepared her remarks intending to share them with you today, but reading it out loud, even in the privacy of her own home, was too painful. She’s at home today with her sons. Family Courts also handle so many different types of legal issues, and the stories you will hear today represent only some of them. Today’s program is far too short to embrace the full scope of matters that Family Courts resolve.

Of the stories you will hear today, some end well. But even those are filled with stress, challenge, trauma, heartbreak and loss. You’ll hear that many of our speakers turned their lives around *in spite of* Family Court and the governmental systems for aiding troubled families, not because of aid from those entities. Chief Judge Kaye knew we could do better. So do all those you will hear from today. And so do I.





Program

I'd like to invite to the podium Ms. Jessica Horan-Block, the Director of Complex Litigation at the Bronx Defenders. Much of the representation in Family Court is handled by public defense organizations; the family law practitioners in those organizations are forced to handle unmanageable caseloads.

The New York Office of Indigent Legal Services has developed caseload standards for Family Court practitioners, and its research shows that caseloads as of 2023 were 70 percent too high, that nearly 90 percent of all Family Court practitioners had excessively high caseloads, and 25 percent had caseloads that were triple the maximum feasible caseload. In addition, the dedicated and overworked attorneys in those organizations are paid far less than equivalent lawyers prosecuting families. And although 18-B attorneys recently received their first pay increase in more than 20 years, they still struggle to sustain their practices, resulting in shortages of Family Court practitioners, most acutely felt in upstate New York.

Representation of the kind Ms. Horan-Block provides is the exception, not the rule, but is what everyone in Family Court should be entitled to. If we truly wish to avoid unnecessary trauma and family separation, we must properly fund lawyers in Family Court, so they can fully represent their clients and work toward dismantling the discrimination present in the child welfare system. Ms. Horan-Block will introduce our next speaker.



Jessica Horan-Block

Introduction by Jessica Horan-Block, Esq.

Good afternoon. My name is Jessica Horan-Block, and I am the Director of Complex Litigation in the Family Defense Practice at the Bronx Defenders. Thank you for having me today. My team is dedicated to representing parents facing abuse charges based on their child’s medical findings, most of whom are separated from their children while the case proceeds.

In nearly fifteen years litigating medically complex Family Court cases, I have routinely seen parents treated as guilty before any evidence is heard—despite the state’s burden of proof and the known harms of family separation. Parents are often asked to explain disputed medical findings from the outset, even when multiple doctors disagree. One of the hardest things to explain to a parent is why it feels like everyone has already decided they are guilty. We would better serve New York’s families by approaching these cases with curiosity, recognizing that a request for a hearing usually signals missing information, and remembering that the parents in our courtrooms are human—and must be presumed innocent.

It is my honor to introduce Sarai Mejia, a remarkable mother. I had the privilege of representing Ms. Mejia in Bronx Family Court when her two young children were removed from her care based on allegations of severe abuse. There is something uniquely devastating about seeking medical care for your child, only to be blamed once an injury is identified.

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You will hear directly from Ms. Mejia about what she and her family endured while attempting to prove their innocence. Through prolonged separation from her children and repeated court appearances, Ms. Mejia remained unwavering in her commitment to her family, facing the process with dignity and courage. As public defenders, clients entrust us with their lives and their stories. I am grateful for the trust Ms. Mejia placed in me during an incredibly difficult time, and it is an honor to stand beside and introduce her today as she reminds us what justice demands.



Sarai Mejia

Remarks of Sarai Mejia

Good afternoon. My name is Sarai Mejia. I grew up in the Bronx. My amazing parents came here from Colombia, and they've been married for sixty years. I'm the youngest of eight, and I've always wanted a big family. Our baby girl was born on New Year's Day in 2023, and a year and a half later, our son was born. We were overjoyed. Those first five weeks after my son's birth were beautiful. I was able to breastfeed—something I struggled with for my daughter—and I was surrounded by family and support.

Five weeks after my son's birth, when I was out getting groceries, I got a call from my fiancé that my baby boy was not breathing. When I arrived home, my street was full of firetrucks and ambulances. At the hospital, doctors surrounded my son's tiny body. He was intubated and put on a ventilator. I found out that he had a cardiac arrest and a stroke. He survived and made it to the hospital because my fiancé had performed CPR on him for seven minutes until help arrived.

I lived in the hospital for a month with my son. I was so stressed that I couldn't eat and my body stopped making breastmilk. When he was discharged, finally, my whole family was home and together. But once home, he immediately acted fussy. No matter what I did, I couldn't soothe him. I laid him on the bed and checked each part of his body. When I got to his right leg, he screamed. I called the hospital and asked if I could bring him back. "No," they said, "just give him Tylenol." But my motherly instincts told me something was wrong, so I brought him to a different hospital and insisted he get an x-ray. That's how we discovered his femur was fractured. From that moment on, the entire atmosphere changed from assistance to accusation. Then, ACS told me that my son's previous hospital stay was now considered the result of abuse.

A week later, ACS removed my daughter and restricted my contact with my hospitalized son. Now, neither of my children were home. It was the first time I had ever seen my fiancé cry in our eight years together. He told me, "I saved my son's life and now they are taking my daughter." When my son got discharged, ACS took him too. I don't have the words to tell you what it was like to read the family court petition that said me and my fiancé had "repeatedly abused and neglected" our children based on my son's brain and bone findings. I reached out to the Bronx Defenders and when I showed up in court, I met my lawyer, Jess. When I told her what happened, she believed me. She treated me like a human, and she reassured me that I was a great mom when I really needed to hear it. She told me we would fight the abuse charge but it would take time. During the case, my time with my children was limited. Daily acts like bathing and putting my children to bed had to be supervised. As a stay-at-home mom, it was humiliating. I had to kiss my daughter to sleep and go home. I couldn't be there to soothe my son when he woke up and needed me.

During the court process, I felt like I was guilty until I could prove myself innocent. Jess brought in a pediatric neurosurgeon who testified that my son's brain was healthy and his cardiac arrest was because of natural causes, not abuse. A pediatric orthopedist explained the fracture could have happened during my son's first hospital stay and he was vulnerable to fracture given his illness.

Jess put on such a strong case that I got my kids back. It took four months. Four months of waking up and seeing their cribs empty. In that time, my son bonded with his caretakers, not me. He cried when I held him. I was not there for his first full bath. I can never get back any of the time he spent out of my care. My fiancé had to fight his case for four more months after mine ended. He had to move out of our home, and I had to take care of the kids alone. That was so hard mentally and financially, but we have such a strong foundation that no court case can break. In the end, the Judge wrote a beautiful decision that cleared him. But no parent should feel guilty or humiliated before evidence comes out.

We are trying now to start over. My fiancé has a new job, which is why he can't be with me here today. Our children are growing beautifully, but the experience stays with us. Our daughter still has anxiety when I leave the room because she is afraid we will be separated again. Our son is a typical second child—full of energy and life, but I am terrified he could fall, like kids do, and what going back to a hospital could mean for us. I still want a big family and more kids, but I am afraid to have another baby because of everything my family has been through. For now, we take each day as it comes, with the strength and faith that God brings. Thank you.



Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

Taking an injured child to the emergency room is a tremendously difficult experience for any parent. It is even more so for poor parents of color. Research shows that children of color who visit emergency rooms are more likely to be evaluated and then reported as suspected abuse victims when compared with white patients. Ms. Mejia's race should not have made one of her most difficult experiences as a mother exponentially more difficult, nor should she have to live with the continuing fear that taking her children for medical attention might result in losing them. Ms. Mejia, I wish we could restore the time you lost with your children, but perhaps sharing your experience will avoid that loss for other families.

Thank you, Ms. Mejia.

It is my pleasure to invite Judge Liberty Aldrich to the podium. She is now the Executive Director of the Children's Law Center, but before that served in the Bronx as an exemplary Family Court Judge, and before that led the Center for Justice Innovation as Managing Director and General Counsel. She is a brilliant lawyer, advocate and innovator—and an exceptionally wonderful human being.



Hon. Liberty Aldrich (ret.) with Jahlia Hernandez

Introduction by Hon. Liberty Aldrich (ret.)

Thank you, Judge Wilson, for shining a light on the critical role of the Family Court to New Yorkers. I have had the honor of working in and with the Family Court for my entire legal career, first as a litigator, then a policy maker, a nonprofit founder, a family court judge and now, in the best role so far—no offense to all my judicial colleagues—as the executive director of the Children’s Law Center.

Our clients face the trauma of domestic violence, migration, continual conflict, death of a parent or caregiver, or mental health issues, often compounded by economic inequality. But the very real prospect of not having a voice in the decisions that shape their most intimate lives, of being told that they don’t matter by their family members or by powerful people, causes additional damage.

At CLC, we undertake the critical work of being children’s outside voice, in the courtroom and the community, to let them know that they matter. Unfortunately, many children do not get an attorney. Many do not have anyone to stand up for them and what they need. That’s why I am so proud to introduce Jahlia Hernandez, CLC’s inaugural Children’s Voice Project fellow, who is raising awareness about the importance of taking children seriously.

I take no credit for Jahlia’s awesomeness, she found us, but I could not be more pleased that we have been able to work with her to build a movement. She has found her voice, and now you get to hear it.



Remarks of Jahlia Hernandez

My name is Jahlia Hernandez. I am the founder and inaugural Fellow of the Children’s Voice Project at the Children’s Law Center. I was also one of CLC’s clients for 12 years. I am 23 now, which means I spent more than half of my life as a subject child in Brooklyn Family Court.

My parents’ court case started when I was 2 years old, when my mother separated from my dad because of his emotionally abusive behavior. Around that time, a court entered an order giving my parents each 6 months per year with me. But my dad didn’t return me to my mother after his 6 months. Instead, he left me with his parents in upstate New York, while he continued to live in Florida. My mother filed a writ to have me returned to her. All I remember was that I was separated from my mother who I wanted to be with. About a year and a half later, when I was in kindergarten, I was returned to my mother’s care. She threw me a welcome-home party, which is one of my earliest memories.

As time went on, my father’s behavior got more aggressive, and the court issued an order of protection against him. Pick up and drop offs were moved to a precinct. There were more than a dozen petitions concerning violations. I heard my father call my mother terrible names and spit at her in front of the police. While some people might say that isn’t serious abuse, it had a big impact on me. I was very hurt, confused, and scared.

I was also embarrassed and just wanted to be a normal kid. Other kids didn’t have to go through this, or so I thought. Now I know that many children do. That is why I have come back to CLC as a Children’s Voice Fellow—to tell other children that they are not alone. Kids have a right to tell the adults how they feel. And adults should listen. I wish the court had made me feel safer when visiting my dad. Those exchanges at a precinct made me think I had done something wrong, and eventually I refused to visit him altogether. Looking back, alternative arrangements, such as supervised visits, could have made the visits more humane, and reduced my anxiety and fear.

Throughout my childhood, I repeatedly told my father that I wanted to live with my mother. He dismissed my wishes, telling me they did not matter because I was “just a kid.” Being told this consistently made me feel powerless and unheard. Now I know that my dad was engaged in what we might call “litigation abuse.” He refused to accept that I wanted to have some say in when I visited with him.

During my case, I was fortunate to have an attorney from CLC, Ms. Hillary Chacker. Having an Attorney for the Child was life-changing for me. She became one of the only people in my life that I felt comfortable talking to about my family situation. It was too hard to talk to my friends and too stressful to talk to family. As I know now, “Justice for children means giving them a voice.” Ms. Chacker gave me a voice at a time when I didn’t yet know how to use it myself, at a time when my father actively worked to suppress my voice. Knowing that there was an adult in the courtroom whose sole job was to advocate for me made me feel seen, protected, and less alone in a system that often felt overwhelming. She showed me firsthand the power of having someone stand up for you in court.

In the court’s final decision, the judge explicitly recognized that my father’s refusal to consider my wishes, and his reliance on an order issued when I was ten, were not appropriate given my age and development as a teenager. That acknowledgment affirmed the importance of listening to children as they mature.

Over the past year, I have had the opportunity to help reimagine how young people in New York City experience and engage with the family court system. The Children’s Voice Project provides a platform for youth who have been involved in the court system to share their knowledge and experiences with current CLC clients, the court, and the broader community. The project reminds us that our work is not only about ensuring that children have support in court. It is also about empowering them by helping them understand what court is, what gets decided there, and that their feelings are important. Although it is difficult to look back on my childhood, I now realize that it gave me purpose. I am a 1L in law school and I can’t wait to graduate so that I can be a lawyer for children like me.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

In *Mirrors of the Soul*, Kahlil Gibran admonished us to keep “away from the wisdom which does not cry, the philosophy which does not laugh and the greatness which does not bow before children.” Those words should animate Family Court. We cannot faithfully pursue a child’s best interests unless responsible adults can caringly and carefully listen to what that child wishes. Children feel and understand things deeply, just as adults do, and can be hurt even more deeply by actions that reject the validity of their feelings. Ms. Hernandez, I have no doubt that, as a lawyer, you will listen intently to children.

Thank you, Ms. Hernandez.

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I now invite Dawne Mitchell to the podium. Over the past twenty years, Dawne has grown from law intern to Chief Attorney of the Legal Aid Society’s Juvenile Rights Practice. She is also one of the three co-chairs of the Permanent Commission on Justice for Families. I thank her for her decades of commitment to serving New York’s children, for her leadership of the Commission, and for introducing our next speaker.



Dawne Mitchell

Introduction by Dawne Mitchell, Esq.

Good afternoon, my name is Dawne Mitchell. For three decades, I have had the profound honor of serving as an Attorney for Children in New York City Family Court—a journey that began as an intern and has shaped me as a servant leader. As the Chief Attorney of the Juvenile Rights Practice of The Legal Aid Society, I have the privilege of leading an extraordinary team of attorneys, social workers, paralegals, investigators, volunteers, interns, and advocates who share a singular mission: to elevate, empower, and ensure access to justice for the children and families of New York City. At the heart of our work is an unwavering commitment to centering the voices and experiences of the young people we represent—recognizing that their perspectives are not just valuable, but essential to meaningful advocacy.

It is this belief that led us to intentionally integrate professionals with lived experience into our interdisciplinary model. Today, I am deeply proud to introduce one of those leaders: Jasiyah Gilbert, our Client and Community Engagement Manager. Jasiyah’s journey—from navigating foster care, to overcoming instability, and systemic barriers, to ultimately joining our practice—is a powerful testament to resilience, brilliance, and purpose. His work with our Youth Leadership Board, client community and partners ensures that the insights of current and former clients directly inform the policies, programs, and practices that shape their lives.

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Jasiyah embodies the very values we fight for every day: dignity, agency, and opportunity. His voice strengthens our practice, his leadership uplifts our clients, and his lived expertise helps transform systems that too often respond to crisis rather than prevent harm. I am honored to call him a colleague, a partner in advocacy, and I am deeply grateful for the light he brings to our shared vision to build a more just future for the children and families of New York City.



Jasiyah Gilbert

Remarks of Jasiyah Gilbert

My name is Jasiyah Gilbert. My mother had me when she was 18. At the time, she was enrolled in undergraduate studies and trying to build a future for herself and for me. But affordable childcare was out of reach, and my mother was forced to drop out of college. That interruption altered the trajectory of her life and limited the opportunities available to our family from the very beginning.

My mother also lived with untreated PTSD, depression, bipolar disorder, and significant emotional trauma—much of it rooted in the deportation of my father to Guyana. After his removal, her instability deepened. She struggled to maintain employment, and sometimes we slept in parks or shelters. For much of my childhood, we lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn with my grandmother and uncle, relying almost exclusively on my grandmother’s income to survive.

When I was about five, ACS filed an abuse and neglect case. The case went on for several years until my grandmother was granted custody, which created significant tension within our household. Although my mother still lived with us, my grandmother’s legal authority meant she had final say over decisions about my life. This dynamic—combined with unresolved trauma, emotional instability, and a rigid power structure—created an

emotionally volatile environment. My grandmother came from an era where children had no voice or rights in the home. Disagreements escalated, and rather than receiving mediation, family counseling, or supportive services, my grandmother chose to place me into foster care through the court system as a so-called “voluntary” placement. At first, I went into congregate care, and it was one of the worst experiences of my life. I felt like I was living in a badly operated warehouse for children—it was basically a detention facility where I had no freedom about what to wear, what to eat, when to sleep. Then, I got lucky: I was placed with a family I knew from church, and I stayed with them during the rest of my childhood.

As I became an older youth in care, I found my transition planning deeply inadequate. For me, the “preparation for independence” amounted to little more than placement on a waiting list for NYCHA housing. Although public housing is preferable to homelessness, I did not think it would be an environment in which I could heal from my trauma or find long-term stability. With no other real alternatives, I returned to living with my grandmother, the least harmful option available in a system that offered no others.

Despite returning to the chaos and tension of that household, I enrolled in City Tech, and I graduated with a degree in law and paralegal studies in 2024. I loved my major, and I chose it because, from my time in Family Court, I had come to understand that lawyers were persons of power who could change others’ lives for the better. While I was in college, I got involved with the Children’s Defense Fund, and through them I participated in a life-changing pilot program, the first of its kind in the United States, designed by and for youth who had aged out of foster care. In the program, I received \$1,000 a month in unconditional direct cash payments. More than anything else, I attribute my successful transition out of care to this program. That support gave me something the system rarely offers young people leaving foster care: choice and the responsibility that comes with it. Instead of working multiple jobs to get by, I was able to focus on school, take internships, and gain the experience that opened doors for me after graduation.

I now work at the Legal Aid Society, where I am the Client and Community Engagement Manager in the Juvenile Rights Practice. One of my responsibilities is to facilitate our Youth Leadership Board, a group of current and former clients who have been impacted by the child welfare or juvenile justice systems. The Youth Leadership Board engages in advocacy and community organizing—it is an important platform through which lived experts’ voices are heard and allows for more informed decision making among policymakers and providers.

Today, my mother is stable and doing better than she once was, though the effects of untreated trauma and systemic failure continue to shape her life. I currently live with my grandmother in part as a caretaker, as she has significant health issues, while also working toward securing my own housing and long-term stability.

My journey into advocacy was born from survival. And many parts of my story are not unique. They are the commonplace, predictable occurrences in a system that is reactive instead of preventative. We wait until families are in crisis, until children are removed, until trauma is entrenched—then we intervene. By that point, the harm can be irreversible. If families are given access to resources before crises escalate—affordable childcare, educational support, housing stability, financial assistance, mental health care, youth-centered services—many cases like mine would never enter Family Court at all. Our government systems, including the courts, have the power to prevent harm—not just respond to it. Will they? Thank you.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

Mr. Gilbert’s journey is like a haunted, involuntary train ride with stops at several abandoned or decrepit stations. Mr. Gilbert was a child who didn’t ask to be without a father or without treatment resources or other supports for his mother. He didn’t ask to be sleeping on park benches or in shelters. He didn’t ask to be warehoused in congregate care, or to have no assistance in becoming independent as he aged out of the foster care system. Even if you believe that society didn’t owe his parents anything—didn’t we all owe Mr. Gilbert something more when he was a child?

New York’s families need services that would prevent court involvement in the first place, as well as creative structures to let court-involved children reach their potential. Mr. Gilbert’s success shouldn’t have been determined by the luck of knowing a family that would take good care of him. And although I would not have imagined that direct cash payments of \$1000 a month would speed a successful transition to mature adulthood, it is encouraging to see that others have better imaginations than I. Mr. Gilbert, I know your work at Legal Aid will help children avoid the scary train ride you found yourself on.

Thank you, Mr. Gilbert.

Our next speaker is here today despite immensely difficult personal circumstances: her mother passed away a few weeks ago. Sharing one’s story in these surroundings with this audience is difficult for even professional speakers, so to help our next speaker get through her remarks at this very difficult time, we recorded them.

Here to introduce our next speaker is Ms. Kiran Malpe of the Center for Justice Innovation. Ms. Malpe has been by Ms. Bracken’s side for nearly 10 years, sticking with her even when Ms. Bracken was a belligerent and uncooperative teenager. Our former colleague on the Court of Appeals, Eugene Fahey, used to quote Professor Cornel West’s saying that “justice is what love looks like in public.” That sounded great, but I didn’t fully understand it until I saw the relationship between Ms. Malpe and Ms. Bracken.



Tiffany Bracken and Kiran Malpe

Introduction by Kiran Malpe, LSCW

Good afternoon. My name is Kiran Malpe and I am a licensed clinical social worker with specialized training in early childhood trauma for children ages birth to five years old—our littlest humans, and the most complex—extremely vulnerable but also extraordinarily resilient.

Ten years ago, I helped the Center for Justice Innovation, in partnership with the Unified Court System, develop and implement an innovative court-based program in the Bronx called Strong Starts, a specialized, problem-solving model designed to address the unique needs of young children and their families when abuse or neglect has been alleged. Infants are disproportionately represented on child protection court dockets. Infancy and early childhood are times of unparalleled neurological development, and ruptures in attachment relationships to primary caregivers can produce lifelong mental, emotional and physical disabilities. Strong Starts brings the science of early development and the impact of early childhood trauma to Family Court—directly providing clinical support to families, educating judges and lawyers about the impact trauma can have on early development, and sharing available resources and effective trauma responsive interventions. Strong Starts coordinators facilitate monthly clinical conferences to promote tailored service planning, and to support collaboration and problem solving amongst parties to recognize the importance of the child’s early attachment relationships, and to support repair when there has been a separation or rupture. Strong Starts launched in 2015 with the Honorable Sarah Cooper in the Bronx as the first dedicated Judge, and has since expanded to all five counties in New York City, as well as to Westchester and Erie Counties.

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I met Tiffany Bracken in Bronx Family Court almost 10 years ago. She was a youth in foster care, a new mother with a beautiful baby girl. She was sassy and smart and funny and kind. She was also angry, boy was she angry—angry at a system full of adults that let her down and didn't hear her, didn't believe in her. Tiffany is like no other person I have known. She is an exceptional young woman who has overcome extraordinary adversity and endured unspeakable harm at the hands of people and systems that were supposed to keep her safe. From the moment I met her, Tiffany has always put her daughter's needs above her own. Her daughter is her heart, her everything and the fact that their relationship is thriving after so much pain and trauma is a testament to Tiffany's superhuman grit and resilience. I have learned so much from her, she has made me a better social worker, and it is my absolute honor to introduce Ms. Tiffany Bracken.



Remarks of Tiffany Bracken

My name is Tiffany Bracken. I have lived in 25 foster homes and have been involved in the child welfare system for 15 years. I have fought so hard to reclaim my life, and to break the cycle from the system for my daughter. This is our story.

When I was seven, my brothers and I were removed from our mother, who struggled with addiction. I felt confused, angry, and sad to be taken away from my mom and not to be placed in the same home as my brothers. I began to struggle in elementary school, but things got worse in middle school when my mother's rights were terminated. In my life, foster homes have not been good places. As a foster kid, I felt different, like an outcast. In one of the placements, I was molested and raped by three people in the home. The abuse went on nightly, for years. I became suicidal. I started running away from my foster home to be with

my mom, but the police kept bringing me back to the foster homes. At age 13, I was given my first drug. I was in and out of foster homes, psychiatric hospitals, and on the streets, using drugs and was sex trafficked.

At age 15, I got pregnant. I was embarrassed, and nobody wanted me to have it. Then I found out it was a girl. I was living with my child's father's family at the time, but the agency said they would take my baby away from me unless I went back into a foster home. I moved back right away.

The day I gave birth was beautiful. When I gave birth, everyone said how beautiful she looked. She looked just like me. I was 16 years old. All my love went to the baby. I was with her 24/7. We got into a nice routine where I went back to GED school, and she went to daycare while I was at school.

One day, when my baby was ten months old, my foster mother's daughter began screaming at me that nobody cared about me because I was a foster kid. She pushed and hit me. I ran away to a friend's house with my daughter. After a few days, I started to run low on baby food and pampers, so I asked my case worker if my daughter could go back to the foster home a day before me so I would have a day to collect myself. She said that was okay, but she lied to me. She brought my daughter to ACS.

Then my court case as a parent began. I felt unsafe at the foster home, so I didn't go back. That's when Ms. Kiran from the Strong Starts Program began to help me. She was the first adult I ever began to trust. She looked past all my anger and trauma and saw me as a human being. She was the first person to believe me, recognize my past traumas, and see me. Even though my judge was fair, court was difficult for me because it reminded me of mothers' case. My daughter's case was confusing, and it had ended with an ACD. I agreed to give temporary custody to my daughter's father, because I did not want my daughter to experience foster homes with me.

My daughter's father and his mother continued using the system to try to get me out of my daughter's life. One day, I took my daughter to the hospital for a medical issue, which led to another case, this time in Queens. Strong Starts was not a part of this new case, so Ms. Kiran was not there to guide me. I felt like my ACS worker was very biased, so I was back to supervised visits, retaking services, and visiting my daughter at an ACS building. A place that was very triggering. The case dragged on for five years.

Then, I aged out of foster care at 21 and got my own apartment. It was a big gap between foster care and the real world. I struggled, on my own. All the trauma that I had experienced was too much, it led me back to addiction and severe mental health struggles. I was incarcerated. I made multiple attempts to hurt myself, and one time I tried to kill myself and ended up in the hospital again. Sitting in the hospital, I knew I had to change

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everything. I began to understand and treat my mental health diagnoses of PTSD and BPD. I became clean, sober, and started seeing life outside of addiction and began to love myself. I started writing poetry about my story and was even published by NYU. I got my first job at 23 and then achieved one of my life goals and became a parent advocate at my foster care agency. Michael Bracken was the APPLA case worker at my foster agency, and agreed to be my dad when I was 23.

I now work at another foster care agency as a parent advocate. It is not just my job; it is my passion. It helps me heal because I help parents who are just like I was. I help parents get resources and support that my mother never had. I am proud of how far I have come. I am grateful to the people who helped me: Ms. Kiran; Ms. Sam from CASA; Ms. Denny, my old foster mother; and my dad, Michael Bracken.

My daughter is 10 now, and I have joint custody. She is amazing, smart, and she has my sense of humor. Every choice I make is to keep my daughter stable and not involved with ACS or the courts. I want to dedicate my life to teaching others about trauma and compassion, including what trauma looks like when it shows up in court. I am an example that people who have been traumatized by the system and endured abuse are capable of thriving. Breaking the cycle is hard. But I am doing it for my mother, who passed away last month, for my daughter, and for all the people like me.



Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

One of the many things you see in Ms. Bracken’s life is the absence of a reliable, stable, loving adult who was able to stick by her no matter how difficult her troubles, until she found first Ms. Malpe and later Mr. Bracken. When meeting with last year’s speakers, it became clear that each of them had childhoods lacking that essential element. Family separation often begets more family separation, and court involvement begets more court involvement. Through the Strong Starts program, courts implement individually tailored plans based on clinical best practices to break intergenerational cycles of harm. A 2024 study showed a substantial decrease in subsequent child welfare court involvement for Strong Starts participants. All our Family Courts could benefit from the availability of Strong Starts.

Last month, Ms. Bracken and I met for a couple of hours, and she told me she was proud of herself. I told her I could not think of anyone who should be prouder, considering everything she’s gone through and where she now is. She also told me she is a poet, and I’ll now take a moment to read you a few lines from her poem, *Upside-Down Thoughts*:

Feeling numb to the world, bleeding tears,
Lying there lifeless and thinking,
Am I worth it?
Do I even matter to anyone?
Would I ever be free from this prison?

Ms. Bracken, you know you are free now, and I hope you know that you matter to me, to everyone in this room, and to countless other people who will have a better chance because of you. All children are worth it. I hope you find peace in the wake of the loss of your mother, and I look forward to seeing all that you and your daughter do together in the future.

Thank you, Ms. Bracken.

I’d like to next invite to the podium someone I admire greatly: the Honorable Fatimat Reid. Judge Reid is a Family Court Judge in Monroe County—that’s where Rochester is, for those who don’t know. Eight years ago, she sought to become a Family Court Judge not for power or prestige, but because of a passionate calling to serve children in situations that are deeply personal to her. We aspire to that commitment from all our Family Court Judges. Judge Reid, thank you for being here, for being an exemplary Family Court Judge, and for introducing our final speaker.



Introduction by Hon. Fatimat Reid

Àwọ̀n ọ̀mọ́ ñkò?

Àwọ̀n ọ̀mọ́ ñkò?

In my native language of Yoruba, that question means, “How are the children?” It is a customary greeting, and it reflects a core belief: that the well-being of children tells us everything we need to know about the health and future of a society.

Good afternoon. It is truly an honor to stand before you today. My name is Fatimat Olabisi Reid, and I serve in the Seventh Judicial District as a Monroe County Family Court Judge. When I first took the bench in Family Court, that question, “How are the children?” was not abstract for me. It was deeply personal.

I immigrated to the United States when I was ten years old. Not long after, my sister and I entered the foster care system. Like many children in that space, there were moments when I felt unseen and unheard. Moments when decisions were being made about my life without my voice truly being present in the room. Those experiences did not leave me when I became a judge. They shaped how I see every child who appears before me.

Family Court is often the first, and sometimes the most powerful, place where society and the system speak directly into a child’s future. I have always believed that if we expect young people to trust this system, they must first understand it, and they must know that their voices matter.

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That belief led me, alongside an incredible team of partners from local agencies, and with the support of Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Edwina Richardson, to develop a youth-in-court orientation program in Monroe County. We invite foster youth into the courthouse not as litigants, but as learners. They meet judges. They meet court staff. They learn about permanency hearings. They learn what rights they have, what decisions are being made, and how those decisions shape the paths available to them. And perhaps most importantly, they leave knowing that this system sees them.

Through that work, I had the privilege of meeting the young man I am here to introduce today: Damon Bradford. Damon, like many of the children we serve, entered foster care at a young age. And today, he serves as a Child Protective Services caseworker. Every day, he walks back into the very system that once shaped his own life. Not with bitterness, but with purpose. He shows up for children who are navigating the same questions he once faced. He understands their fear. He understands their hope. And he understands the power of being truly seen.

Damon represents what is possible when courts, families, and communities work together with intention. He is not just a success story, he is a bridge between what the system is and what it can be.

It is my great honor to introduce someone who embodies resilience, service, and the profound impact of Family Court when we center children not just as cases, but as futures. Please join me in welcoming Mr. Damon Bradford.





Damon Bradford

Remarks by Damon Bradford

My name is Damon Bradford. I am ecstatic to have this opportunity to share my story with you today.

It is very difficult to compress 32 years of life into just a few minutes. I was born in Rochester, New York. I lived with my mother and three other siblings. Two older and one younger. Ever since I can remember, my mother suffered from mental illness and diabetes that ate her alive. My father was in and out of prison my entire life—but never in my life.

Before age of nine, I had already lived four different states and 12 different homes between friends, family, and foster care. In third grade, while living in my fourth foster home with my younger sister, a sinus infection spread to my brain. I was hospitalized for a month and underwent a double brain operation. Before I left the hospital, my foster family said they couldn't handle my medical needs. My sister stayed with them, I moved to my fifth placement—fortunately, I was placed with a loving family that nursed me back to health.

By 13, my sister and I were living with my mother again. I had to become the man of the house: missing school to make sure my mother was taking her medicine, cleaning, cooking dinner, helping my sister with homework. I'm not exaggerating when I say that I missed all but a few weeks of seventh grade. When my mother fell into a diabetic coma, I went back into care—fortunately, with that same family who had nursed me back to health.

On October 19, 2010, that family adopted me. Not to brag, but I feel like I got placed with the best foster family in Monroe County. They showed me a different way of life. When I came to them, I was angry. They put me in taekwondo classes to learn self-discipline. To keep me busy they signed me up for sports and took me to the YMCA. They pushed me to go to college, and I did. I am the first in my family to graduate.

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As Justice Reid mentioned, I work for CPS now. The reason I joined is because I wanted to help make a difference in kids' lives. Although I have my gripes with the system, my journey through it helped me become part of *the 8 percent of former American foster youth who graduate college*. I feel it is my obligation to give back. It is my dream to start a program to mentor kids going through the system. I want to give them a place where they can meet people who have gone through similar situations and have come out successful—to create an environment where they don't have to wear that scarlet letter, a place where they feel safe, loved, protected and supported. I would like to become a foster parent and adopt some day too. But most importantly, I want to be in the room with the people discussing how we can turn that 8 percent into 80 percent.

I believe the reason my story has a happy ending is because of one thing: community. I was surrounded by people who refused to see me fail: foster families, my biological family, friends, teachers, community resources. During the times of my deepest sorrows, my community made sure I felt safe, loved, protected, and supported.

It is up to us to be the community that refuses to see another kid fail. If we want our children to live, we must first get them out of survival mode. Not only do children going through the family court system have to deal with the bad days of being a normal kid. They also think about their family, if they are going home, the situation that got them involved in family court, where are they going to be living the next day. Their lives are being controlled by complete strangers. They are told to trust the process while sometimes experiencing hurt by the people they trusted. I know we can't fix it all over night, but we can all start by taking steps to be active members in the lives of the children in our communities. It's like Michael Jackson said: "If you wanna make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and make that change." Thank you.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

Mr. Bradford, we chose to end the program with your story because, for me, it represents the promise of Family Court. Foster youth in New York State have a 51 percent high school graduation rate, as compared to 86 percent for students not in foster care. Nationwide, children who spend time in foster care face hardships in later life, including economic insecurity, poor physical and mental health, substance misuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system. 17 percent of state and federal prisoners have spent time in a foster home or institutional care. Mr. Bradford, despite your fantastically difficult beginnings, you have not only survived but gone on to be the first in your family to graduate college, you have selected a career path in which you can give back to children in your community, and you aspire to give back even more deeply in the future by fostering and perhaps even adopting a child. You are an inspiration, and you are absolutely right that the only path to more happy endings like yours is together.

Thank you, Mr. Bradford.



Closing Remarks

In the center of the printed program is a sketch of a grandfather clock. It is the sketch of this grandfather clock, designed by the architect H. H. Richardson around the turn of the twentieth century—when New York State began to plant the seeds that would grow into today’s Family Courts. That was a long time ago. How wisely have we used that time to help children and families?

I chose this image for today’s address because, in Family Court, time is an especially crucial element of the justice we hope to dispense and of the problems we are called on to solve. With children, time is especially valuable, and delays are especially harmful. Any period of family separation feels like an eternity; any delay in a hearing, trial, adjudication or appeal can disrupt foundational relationships, destabilize a life or forfeit a chance to prevent or repair damage. If we fail to support our families in distress, we allow them to stay locked in cycles of trauma, and time transforms from a steady march into the future into a ceaseless reprise of the harms of the past.

Emily Dickinson wrote that “Forever is composed of Nows.” Even with the most entrenched and decentralized of problems, there is always something we can do *now*. Let’s continue our work of finding ways to better serve New York’s families and, as Mr. Bradford suggests, let’s do it together. Thank you.



