A Historic Appointment: Third JD Administrative Judge Christina L. Ryba

John Caher: Welcome to a rare video version of Amici, the podcast program of the New York State Unified Court System. I'm John Caher, and I'm here today with the Honorable Christina Ryba, who was recently appointed Administrative Judge from the Third Judicial District. She's the first woman and first person of color to ever hold that position. Ever!

She's a graduate of Skidmore College and Albany Law School. When Justice Ryba ran for Supreme Court not quite a decade ago, no Black person had ever won a seat in Supreme Court in any of the 28 counties of the Third Department. That amounts to little over 45% of the state! We'll be talking to Justice Ryba today about her journey, her dreams and her aspirations for the Third Judicial District.

Judge, thank you for joining me today. I'd like to start at the beginning. So tell me, if you would, where did you grow up? What did your parents do?

Justice Ryba: Sure. Thank you for having me here today. I'm thrilled to be here. Where did I grow up? I grew up in Albany County, was born at St. Peter's Hospital in the City of Albany and grew up in Loudonville in the South Colonie School District. I went to public schools my whole life. Started out at Shaker Road Elementary, then Sand Creek Middle School, ultimately Colonie High School.

John Caher: What were you like as a child?

Justice Ryba: I was the youngest of four. From the very beginning, I was very bossy, even though you would think the youngest of four would the quieter one, but that just wasn't me. And I'd always tell my older siblings that they weren't the boss, that my mom was the boss. So if she wasn't there, then there's just no boss.

John Caher: Is that still the case with your siblings?

Justice Ryba: The funny thing is, early on, I became the mediator. There's four of us. There's myself and my sister who's a doctor. She's a year and a half older than me, and then there's a big gap. My other sister's eight years older than me. My brother's 10 years older than me. So growing up, even though I was the youngest, they would all come to me to talk about each other or whatever issues that they would have. They would come and I would help mediate. Even though I was quite young compared to the older two, I was the problem solver of the family unit.

John Caher: So you were in training to be a judge long before you realized it, I suppose?

Justice Ryba: Probably. I also came from a broken family. My parents were divorced when I was 1-year-old and they got remarried when I was eight, so it was an interesting dynamic. My mom was always the breadwinner. She was a computer programmer, worked for the DCJS, Division of Criminal Justice Services, as a programmer. Before I was born, though, she was a math teacher. She had a really big impact on me because I always saw this strong woman working and also providing for her family.

John Caher: Was your main early role model your mother?

Justice Ryba: Absolutely. Absolutely. And she still is. She's an amazing strong woman, and she also was very instrumental when I ran for office in 2015. My son at the time was six years old, and so there were times where we had to travel, my husband and I and some people on my team, and she just moved in with us the last two months. So that way we knew our son, Graham, was okay because he was with my mom and we could just focus on the race that I needed to run and hopefully win, which I did.

John Caher: Do you remember when it first occurred to you that you might want to be a lawyer?

Justice Ryba: I think it happened more as a backup plan. I went to Skidmore College. I thought I wanted to be an actor early on. And so my mom, who was a math major and art minor said, "You have to have at least a major that will make some money. I know you want to be an actor, but 99% of actors don't make it. So just pick a major that you can have a backup plan in." So I picked economics, thinking I'll be a stockbroker or I'll do something with numbers, and if that doesn't pan out, then I'll go to law school.

So I graduate from Skidmore. I apply to law schools as an additional backup plan. I thought, "One day maybe I'll fall back, but I am going to pursue acting. I think I really want to do that."

John Caher: And then at Albany Law School, did you have an idea what kind of lawyer you wanted to be, what sort of law you wanted to practice?

Justice Ryba: I spent my junior year of college in London, so that was my favorite year of undergrad. I thought I wanted do some sort of international law. And so I got to Albany Law School. I do my first year. I'm not very serious as a student that first semester because I'm phoning it in. I thought, "Okay, I

did really well at Skidmore. I didn't try hard." And then after my first semester when I saw the grades that I got, and I had a scholarship, I remember meeting with Dean Moore who was the academic dean at the time, and I sat down with her and I talked to her about the grades. I had passed, but I hadn't done well. And I said, "Well, what do you think I should do?" And she's like, "Well, what do you want to do?" I said, "Well, I think I do want to be a lawyer."

It was almost like a light went on, like, "I'm not just here as a backup plan. I want to pursue this." So she said, "Then you got to focus and get it together." And that's when I became a serious student and just started going to the library during my lunch break at the law school. I just turned it around and I haven't looked back. So it stopped being a backup plan after my first semester.

John Caher: Now when you graduated, you had some significant positions. You worked for a law firm, Nixon Peabody. You were a litigator with the Attorney General's office. You worked for the Albany Corporation Counsel's Office. You served as deputy director of the Albany Community Development Agency. How did those varied experiences position you to become a judge?

Justice Ryba: That's a very good question, and I believe each one of those positions really helped solidify the skillset that I need and that I use every day as a judge and now as an administrative judge. For example, deputy director, that was the position that I was appointed to early in my legal career. I was at Corp Counsel and one of my clients at Corp Counsel was the Albany Community Development Agency. They brought me over as general counsel, and soon thereafter, I was appointed as deputy director. So I'm about in my early 20s running an agency along with a director of several, maybe 50, individuals, all who are older than me. And so I had to learn a management style that really supported active listening and making sure that I built a rapport. I didn't look like an intimidating person who could just tell somebody, "Do this or you're going to get in trouble." And I realized when I was in that role, despite what I had learned in law school, which is black letter law, I applied a lot of the facts.

There's a lot of social work involved when you're a manager. If someone's not showing up on time, it's not necessarily that they don't care about their job. There's something going on at home, or they might have a health issue, a mental health issue. So I realize the importance of really getting to know the people who I supervised as well as becoming somebody who can listen and problem-solve and somebody that they could support and rely on. And I realized that in that role, it wasn't that

they were intimidated by me, but they respected me because I was fair and I was a good listener and I was a problem solver. And I also realized the importance of a paper trail, which is something that I always think is important — to follow up with an email or something in writing so that way both parties can be on the same page. So I think that position has helped me with the management side that I'm in today.

And then early in my career as a lawyer, I thought, "One day I want to be a judge."

And I was lucky enough to have met a woman named Rachel Kretser, and she was a City Court judge at the time, and I was a little bit involved in politics. I was working a, I believe at the time I was an assistant corporation counsel and had soon... Actually, I think it was after I had been moved over as deputy director. So she comes in for an interview. I'm on a panel for people who want to be selected as the judicial candidate for the City of Albany judicial position. I'm on the panel that reviews it, and Rachel comes in. She goes to this interview, and I'm just amazed by her credentials. She's a pilot, she's worked at the AG's office, she was just fantastic. So when she was leaving, I believe we had unanimously selected her as the candidate, I went up to her and just said, "I'd like to support your campaign. Is there anything I could do to help?" And she said, "Absolutely."

And so I became part of her campaign and she just brought me to so many events over the summer. We became friends and she became a mentor to me. So I really think that having her early on as a mentor helped, because I had this great position as deputy director, but I wasn't really practicing law in the courtroom. So when I finally sat down with her to talk about my career goals and ultimately wanting to become a judge, she made a really good point of, "Well, you need to get back in the courtroom and get litigation experience because that's what you're going to need to be an effective judge." So I did take her advice and I applied to be an assistant attorney general in the Litigation Bureau, and I received a position.

That was a really impactful friendship, mentorship to have because then going over to Litigation Bureau within the first maybe three months, I'm second chairing a federal jury trial, which is invaluable experience to have as a trial judge.

John Caher: Absolutely. Judge Kretser is a very dear friend of mine as well.

Justice Ryba: Yeah, she's amazing. Full circle, when I was elected, she swore me in as a Supreme Court judge.

John Caher: As I recall in this room!

Justice Ryba: Yes, she did.

John Caher: Now, when you ran for Supreme Court, was it in 2015?

Justice Ryba: Yes.

John Caher: You had to know that no Black person had ever won in the seven county Third JD or the 28 county department. Why did you think you could do what had never been done?

Justice Ryba: Well, to be honest, I didn't know if I could do it. But when I went on the interview and I was selected as a candidate, I talked to my husband and my family — mainly my husband because he's the one who had to help support the financial part of it—and he said, "Let's do this. Just let's give it 100%." And that's what we did. But I didn't know for sure because when you don't have someone that looks like you in a role that you want, in the back of the mind there's always, "Well, what if they're not ready?"

John Caher: The excuse had always been two things: one, in both the district and the department, there were a number of rural counties where there probably aren't very many Black attorneys. The other excuse has been Black attorneys have not been around long enough to pay their political dues. Will you address both of those?

Justice Ryba: Absolutely. So ironically, the reason why I went on interview… I went on the interview to be selected as a Supreme Court candidate in 2014, and I wasn't selected. But I went on that interview because that same year, a member of one of our local parties had made an announcement that the reason why there were no Black candidates was because there were no qualified Black candidates or people of color. And so I said to myself, "I have to go on this interview to correct that narrative." So I went on the interview for the opening. There was a Family Court opening, I believe, that year and a Supreme Court opening.

I didn't get either, but I had a great interview. And so the current chair at the time, when I was leaving my interview, , stopped me and said, "What an amazing interview. We didn't know all of your background. It’s fantastic!" And so I thought, "Okay, well, that's great. I didn't get it, but at least I let them know who I am and what my experience is."

And so the following year when Judge Stein was appointed to the Court of Appeals, they had interviews again to fill the Supreme Court seat. And I went in 2015, the year after I had gone to set this narrative straight that there are qualified people of color in the Third Department, and I was selected after the interview in 2015.

John Caher: There have been qualified people of color in this district for a long time.

Justice Ryba: Absolutely.

John Caher: And in my experience, I don't know if this is telling or not, but most of them, if they become a judge, go elsewhere. We had Randy Treece who became a federal magistrate. We had George Yanthis who became a federal magistrate in White Plains or Westchester. We had Teneka Frost who went to Schenectady. We had Derrek Thomas who went to Syracuse. Is this coincidence?

Justice Ryba: I don't think it's coincidence. I think that they had vision and they found ways to get to the bench, and they've all been very successful. And I look up to them for the trailblazers that they are.

At some point in every jurisdiction change has to happen, and it just so happens that I'm the one who was selected and ran the race and won. But after me, it's clear that the Third Department has qualified people of color because we have Judge Rivera. We have Judge Kevin Bryant. We have Sherry Brooks. We have Will Little. We have Ricja Rice. And now we have Jillian Faison. We had Helena Heath, who was really the trailblazer who started it all in City Court. I don't believe my credentials are any better than those who came before me. It's just that the timing was right and the stars aligned, and here I am.

John Caher: Maybe we're finally over it.

Justice Ryba: Hopefully.

John Caher: Yeah. Now the administrative judge position became available with the recent retirement of Judge Gerald Connolly. Why did you want that job?

Justice Ryba: Because I really look up to Jerry. He's a mentor of mine. So when I was elected in 2015, I don't know if everybody knows, but part of the process for a newly-elected judge is they assign you a mentor to help you navigate as a new judge. I was assigned Judge Connolly to be my mentor, which means in the first month or so of being on the bench, I followed him around. I got advice from him. And when he was no longer my

mentor, he became a friend. And I just saw how he led with empathy and problem solving in mind and was always that person that looked at the big picture and could put himself in your shoes. And so when he was retiring, I just thought, "I want to make sure I carry on his legacy and have the opportunity, if given the opportunity, and build on it." And so I applied because I do believe I have the ability to take this strong Third JD where we are and continue that success. And that's why I applied for the position.

John Caher: What are your goals?

Justice Ryba: My goals are to really expand on some of the committees that we've had in the past that the pandemic caused to stop in their tracks.

For example, we have an amazing Third JD office with work that's happening, but not everybody knows about it. So I'm the co-chair of the Permanent Commission on Access to Justice. And in that role, we look at the justice gaps and how to fill them and make recommendations to the Chief Judge. And I've been able to look at what's happening in all of the other districts because in this role, I get invitations to the local access justice meetings. And it really has opened my eyes to the fact that we do so much in the Third JD, but not everybody knows about it. We're very stoic. So for example, we have our commissioners of jurors, or they're going into the schools, they're talking to them about coming into the courthouses and getting jobs here.

There's field placements. We have mock trials going on. We have a Pride Parade that we bring in people from not just our district, but the state. We don't necessarily put that in a newsletter, but we know what's going on. So as AJ, I would like to connect the seven counties in the district to make sure that we know what each other are doing and build upon it. So we're starting a newsletter. The first issue will be this month, in June.

We've also brought back our Equal Access to Justice Committee, which went dormant after the pandemic, not the work; Anna Wilkinson has been amazing as our justice coordinator. But we're now going to have this committee that can do programming similar to what we see in the Fourth and the Sixth judicial districts. I'm super thrilled that Laura Jordan, Judge Jordan, and Judge Choudhury, are now going to co-chair this committee.

I would like to highlight the work that we do in the community. We are doing it, but we don't all see it and we don't all have access to what's happening in each of these other counties. So I think a shared

calendaring will be implemented so that way we can volunteer together and get into the community together.

And then, , big picture, we need to look at ways to sustain what we're doing well, and I think we also need to be prepared for issues with budgets down the road. I think right now we have been so blessed to have a strong support of all of the initiatives that we have going for us here in the state and in our district in particular. But I think we have to maintain the ability to be nimble and think about programming and moving forward with the knowledge that budgets cannot always be as robust as we would like. So I think we need to be prepared.

John Caher: You mentioned chairing the Permanent Commission on Access to Justice. Is that a role you can continue while being Administrative Judge?

Justice Ryba: I do think I can continue it, and my goal is to stay as co-chair. I have two amazing co-chairs that are working with me, Judge Marnin, who's recently been appointed, I believe, a few months ago, and Janet Sabel. Both of them are great to work with. We have Helena Heath, who just started as our executive director.

I'm so focused on Access to Justice as something that I want to continue to build upon and I think having that role and that connection to a statewide commission and my role as an AJ in a district really is a good connection. That way, I can make sure that we're on top of what's happening and we're staying involved in a way that is trending with the goals of our State and our Chief Judge.

John Caher: Access to Justice is obviously very important to you. Why is it so important?

Justice Ryba: I think, well, it's so important because if you don't have an attorney or you don't have the right advice, it's the outcome that's unfair.

When you talk about what makes me unhappy, it's injustice. And I think not having an attorney represent you in a way that gets you the outcome that you deserve is unfair. And so for me to be part of an organization where we can come up with recommendations to fill these gaps and make sure people get better representation or access to the courts or answers to their questions so they know how to navigate, that's what makes life fair, and I want to be part of that solution.

John Caher: I'm glad you're part of it.

Justice Ryba: Thank you.

John Caher: There's a book here that is more than just a prop. What is the significance of this book? What does it mean to you?

Justice Ryba: This book is really important to me because I believe any leader who transitions needs to be aware of obstacles that may happen. So my sister, my older sister, when I received this job, she mentioned to me that she always, when she promotes somebody, she's an engineer, she makes sure that they have a copy of *The First 90 Days*.

At first I thought, "Oh, well, that's probably just for engineers." But I then purchased the book, I downloaded it to my Audible, and it's really how to navigate your first 90 days in a successful way. And sometimes I think people think when you're promoted that the skill sets that you had at the prior job will just automatically make you successful at the next level. While I was supervising judge of the Supreme Court for the last year and a half, one might think, "Okay, well that's leadership. So you can transition that type of role into the administrative judge role."

But this book has been really valuable because administrative judge is not just supervising other judges or actually working with judges. It's the entire district and the whole structure. So we've got security, we have court clerks, we have court reporters. And so it's really about building alliances, actively listening, and I have this chart. It really is just making sure I don't get into the vicious cycle of transition. Instead, I want to be the virtuous cycle of transitions, which is, you start with focused-learning, effective relationship building, and then it builds up from there. And so I've already listened to it once on Audible. I'm on my second go-through, and I really think it's been helpful to frame how big this role is and how much I don't know. I think so many people go into a role because they've been successful and thinking that they're going to hit the ground running.

The book gave examples of what not to do and how to have those early issues, to actually avoid those early pitfalls by actively listening and understanding that you don't always have the solutions right away. It's more important to gather all the information and make informed decisions with your partners. And I'm building new partners in this role.

There's other AJs that I've been calling out and asking questions. Deb Karalunas has been amazing. She's the AJ of the Fifth. Eugene Faughnan, he is the AJ of the Sixth. He's my mentor AJ. And of course, Kris Singh in the Fourth is fantastic. So I feel like I have these people who I can reach out to, but it's also just a reminder that there's a lot I don't know, and I

need to be very careful and cautious as I endeavor to sustain the success of a Third JD.

John Caher: I'm sure there's a learning curve, and there are lot of things you don't know, but in the district there are, I don't know, dozens of judges, I suppose, hundreds of employees. A lot of them know you, a lot of them don't. What do you want the judges and non-judicial staff to know about you?

Justice Ryba: I want them to know that I applied for this job and I have this job because I want to help them become the best public servants that they can be. And the only reason why I wanted this role is because I believe we have a great group that is working hard, that has the same goal in mind, which is to make sure justice is served. So I'm here to troubleshoot. I know it's not always going to be easy, but that's why I became a judge. I like to solve problems. I love to help people meet in the middle. That's how life is.

A lot of times, there's things that you want to go a certain way, but then there's restrictions on what you can do. And it's that meeting in the middle and finding those ways to move forward, those wins that we can all celebrate together. I'm that person who has always wanted to help, the same person who was bossing my siblings around, but at the end of the day was the one that they came to for advice and counsel. And I hope that I can earn their trust and help them solve the problems that we're going to obviously. undoubtedly have as we navigate life together as a district.

John Caher: That's very encouraging. As an unsuccessfully-recovering journalist, I know enough to ask the questions at the end that someone might hang up on me for or walk away from me for. So since we're nearing the end, tell me something I don't know about you. Tell me something only your family and friends. Tell me your secret.

Justice Ryba: Let's see. Well, I was the Tulip Queen of Albany.

John Caher: Oh, really?

Justice Ryba: Yes, the 1997 Tulip Queen of Albany, which was a fantastic year because you're the ambassador for the mayor. And so I went to several events. I met Mary Lou Whitney, and it was the way I learned to come out of my shell and talk to strangers, which is a skill set that I used when I ran for office. Fast-forward to 2015, I'm walking around, like you said, in districts where, or in counties where, there's nobody that looks like me. Yet, I can walk up to them and just talk to them and ask them how they're doing.

And so while people think, "Oh, that's like a beauty contest or something," it isn't. It's really about volunteerism and getting out there and being a role model in your community.

John Caher: More of a talent contest than a beauty contest, right?

Justice Ryba: Well, there's no talent involved. It's really the ability to interview well and set your platform for the year. You had to go on the interview and tell them what you would want to do. Mine was the Mayor's Literacy Program, so I traveled schools in the City of Albany and I read to kids and talked to them about going to college. It was the year before I went to law school, so I knew halfway through my year that I was an admitted student at Albany Law School and could talk to them about how to get where I was.

John Caher: It also brings you back to your childhood dream of becoming an actor of sorts.

Justice Ryba: Absolutely.

John Caher: There's a little bit of that involved in that role, I'm sure.

Justice Ryba: Absolutely. And the thing is too, as a lawyer, when you're giving an opening statement or a closing statement, there's an element of acting in that as well.

John Caher: Absolutely.

What makes you laugh?

Justice Ryba: I think a good joke.

John Caher: What makes you sad?

Justice Ryba: Poverty.

John Caher: What makes you mad?

Justice Ryba: Injustice.

John Caher: And finally, tell me about your family. I remember a cute little boy here on the day you were sworn in. He came up not quite to your waist. My guess he's a little taller these days?

Justice Ryba: He is. He's almost six foot. He's 16. We're looking at colleges right now, so will be an empty nester probably in a year and a half, so I'll start counseling. Only kidding. That'll be great. My husband, he's still very supportive. He's in the IT world, and we have a great dog. He's 12, Truman, Shih Tzu. He runs the household. And my mom is still doing well. She comes to visit periodically. My brother is one of my favorite people. He's 10 years older than me. He is in a new relationship. He is gender-fluid and fabulous. And then my two sisters are great. The one's a doctor and we speak every morning. She's my best friend. She's got a daughter, one child, and so we have that similar one child dynamic in our households. And then Sharon is the other middle child, eight years older than me, and she's the one who recommended the book. So she's always supporting me in my professional life and personal life as well.

John Caher: Judge, thank you so much for your time and your insight and your openness. This was fun.

Justice Ryba: It was. Thank you.