

The Bench Press

The Federal Judges Association Newsletter

December 2024



Dear Federal Judges Association (FJA) Members:

As we close another year of judicial public service, I extend warm holiday greetings to each of you and your families. You continue to perform your vital role in the fair and impartial administration of justice. Let us be reminded that we remain the cornerstone of our democratic institutions. Our work transcends the courtroom—it is about our shared commitment to the rule of law.

During this season of reflection and rejuvenation, may you find moments of peace, joy, and respite with your families and loved ones. And let us enter the new year with renewed dedication for the highest ideals of judicial service.

My warmest wishes for a peaceful holiday season and a promising new year.

With profound respect,
J. Michelle Childs, President





Please join one of our esteemed FJA colleagues, Judge James E. Graves of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, as he brings us on a virtual tour of his wonderful Black Santa collection. Judge Graves previously served as a Fifth Circuit director and an active member of the communications committee. With his permission, he shares with us his delightful tradition. Hopefully this will bring a little joy and some smiles into your holiday season.

Enjoy and special thanks to Judge Graves!

It was such a treat when Judge Graves shared this video with the FJA in December 2020. Note there will be references to the year and lockdowns in the video.

Member Spotlight

The FJA spotlights Judge Donald C. Coggins, Jr.



The qualities of intellect, personal integrity, and empathy, as well as an engaging and affable demeanor that made Judge Donald C. Coggins, Jr., legendary as a trial lawyer now

characterize his still-young but already highly accomplished tenure as Judge on the U.S. District Court for the District of South Carolina. “He is always exceptionally well prepared and confident. It’s a thin line to not be cocky. Judge Coggins did not — and does not — have a bit of ego in the courtroom. He was just good,” former law clerk John Warren put it.

Good at many things. Charlie Hodge, a lifelong personal and professional friend, described pick-up basketball games that he and Judge Coggins organized for a group of lawyers early in their practice years: “Don was a fierce competitor. You always wanted him on your side.”

From the basketball court to the legal court ... house, Judge Coggins earned broad confidence. “He tried the biggest and most complex cases,” John Warren recalled. “The Attorney General of South Carolina retained him and three other attorneys to represent the state against pharmaceutical companies over unfair and deceptive trade practices. The team took the case to trial in Spartanburg and won a verdict of more than \$300 million for the state.”

Danny Smith, a decades-long friend, highlighted Judge Coggins’ exceptional capacity for empathy: “He’s been out there in the pit litigating. It was clear to me early on that he had the empathy to understand the client’s interest — in fact, both sides.”

Add to that a lifelong commitment to his community. Smith recalled: “When he finished law school, he had the opportunity to go with several large and prestigious law firms. Don wanted to come back to Spartanburg. His investiture was an impressive and highly memorable occasion. Next time I saw him, he was at a local soup kitchen washing pots and pans. Servant leadership.”

And there were and are the lighter moments. Charlie Hodge said that he and Judge Coggins just naturally fit the roles of Mutt and Jeff: “I would do the cross and be the bad guy. Don would do the opening — wonderful demeanor. Very even tempered. Fierce competitor but smiling while he’s doing it. Me, I’m snarling. Don’s smiling at the jury and they’re smiling back.” Danny Smith recalled one time he was doing the opening when his then-partner Don Coggins noticed that the bailiff had fallen asleep. “Don had to go over to wake him up. Don never let me forget who put the bailiff to sleep during an opening.”

Or, in his more recent role, Judge Coggins recalled one Wednesday during a two-week jury trial over which he was presiding when the lawyers asked to speak with him privately in chambers about a matter. Judge Coggins excused the jury for their lunch break and invited the lawyers back to his chambers. Turns out, one of the sets of attorneys had tickets for the following Monday night to a College Football Playoff National Championship Game between Clemson and LSU (Louisiana State University) in New Orleans. The parties agreed that it would be impossible to wrap up the case before then and asked if the Judge Coggins would consider suspending the trial for two days to let them attend the game. The judge expressed some displeasure that the lawyers had waited so long to bring the request to him, but decided to suspend the trial so that they could go. Following the verdict and conclusion of the trial, Judge Coggins went in person to discharge the jury and thank them for their service, as is his practice, and to ask if they had any questions. They had only one: which team of lawyers had tickets to the Clemson-LSU game? It was a reminder to him of the commonsense wisdom of people who sit on juries.

Charlie Hodge flagged Judge Coggins’ “incredible patience.” He said, “One time he and I were conducting a mediation. We started it around 9 am and by noon the fur was flying. I was ready to bolt. Don held it all together and we walked out at 12 midnight with a result everyone could live with. Most judges are pretty good practitioners. Don was off the charts.”

Nowadays, Judge Coggins finds golf, yard work, and time with family among his restorative activities.

Judge Coggins is grateful: “I feel incredibly lucky that I’ve been able to have the career that I’ve had and to have done what I’ve done. When practicing, I spent lot of time in court, mostly representing plaintiffs, getting to know my clients on a personal level, their families, their children, staying in touch over the years. They’ve become part of my family. And now, I feel the same way about my Chambers staff, the Marshals Service, all the special people who make the courthouse function, criminal and civil lawyers who practice before the court. I feel privileged to deal with them — some of the finest people you’ll ever run across.”

Charlie Hodge put it this way: “Don Coggins is selfless. He could have retired and gone on to live a life of leisure. But he’s about 'What can I do for my fellow man, for my community?' It’s almost as if we had to give him up to the judiciary so that he could benefit so many more people in such a different capacity.”

Committee Updates

Our committees are working for you! Here are some highlights of their accomplishments.

Ethics

Chair: Albert Diaz



As a reminder, Judicial Conference Policy requires judges to complete a Semiannual Conflict Review Certification Statement. Each court is responsible for ensuring compliance with the Policy, which requires judges to certify:

1. That the judge has read and understands the Judicial Conference Mandatory Conflict Screening Policy (Guide to Judiciary Policy, Vol. 2, Pt. C, Ch. 4), and the Code of Conduct for United States Judges.
2. That, consistent with the judge’s obligations under Canon 3C(1)(c) and 3C(2) of the Code of Conduct, the judge has reviewed their financial holdings and those of the judge’s spouse

and any minor child residing in the judge's household. (In addition, the Commentary to Canon 3C provides: "Recusal considerations applicable to a judge's spouse should also be considered with respect to a person other than a spouse with whom the judge maintains both a household and an intimate relationship.").

3. That the judge has prepared or updated their recusal list to include all financial conflicts known to the judge or has reported that the judge does not have any financial interests (including those of the judge's spouse and any minor child) that would create a financial conflict under Canon 3C(1)(c). See Ethics Deskbook for United States Judges, § 4.03; see also Form AO 300 (Checklist for Financial Conflicts).

4. That the judge has prepared or updated their recusal list and implemented appropriate procedures to screen for all other types of conflicts under Canon 3C(1) of the Code of Conduct for United States Judges. See Ethics Deskbook for United States Judges, § 4.01-.02; see also Form AO 301 (Checklist for Other Conflicts).

International Rule of Law

Chair: Cynthia M. Rufe



International Association of Judges

promoting an independent judiciary worldwide

CAPE TOWN NEWS PART I

A most special part of the world, Cape Town, South Africa, was the site of the 66th International Association of Judges Meeting, October 18-23, 2024. As previously reported, the FJA is one of 92 judicial member organizations, and we are the sole American judicial member of IAJ. Our participation in the many functions of this international group of judges was noted from the start of the Central Council, as our delegates stepped up, front and center to deliver reports, awards, education, and robust discussion of the state of judicial independence across the world. Here are the highlights:

IAJ President Duro Sessa opened the Conference by outlining IAJ priorities for his administration, focusing on thematic educational programs such as AI, ethics for judges, judicial security, and adequate funding for courts. He cited the common judicial dilemma, "How do judges fight for rights when they cannot strike or raise money themselves?" This quandary is well known to judges in the United States and underscores the value of our own Federal Judges Association, a national, voluntary organization, in our mission to support and enhance the role of our members within a fair, impartial, and independent judiciary, to actively build a community of interest among our members, and to sustain our system of justice through civics, education, and public outreach.

The IAJ mission is nearly identical. The main aim of the IAJ is to safeguard the independence of the judiciary, which is an essential requirement of the judicial function, guaranteeing human rights and freedom. Emphasizing the IAJ's global efforts to protect judges and to promote human rights, one of the first guest speakers was Professor Margaret Satterthwaite, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers. Linked herein are Professor Satterthwaite's remarks, in full. Her role as a Special Rapporteur throughout the world is an important complement to the efforts of IAJ, FJA, and other judicial organizations which seek to keep judges safe and free to perform their duties

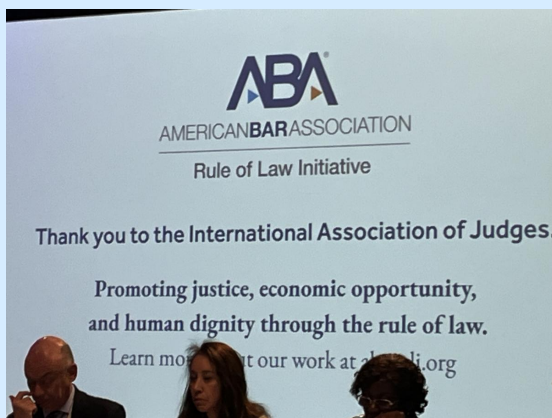
without fear of reprisal for themselves or their families.



Professor Margaret Satterthwaite's Remarks

President Sessa also made an appeal for assistance to Afghan judges, presenting to the assembly an overview of their continued difficulties in Afghanistan, stressing that this issue is far from resolved, and further, that male judges as well as female judges in Afghanistan are endangered. President Sessa invited all IAJ members and others who may have means to contact national and international humanitarian organizations, and to find ways to obtain, first and foremost, visas for our Afghan colleagues.

Early in the program, IAJ presented a recognition award to the **American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative**, known as ROLI, thanking them for their programs and steadfast efforts to “Promote justice, economic opportunity and human dignity through the rule of law.” FJA President Michelle Childs, Past President Margaret McKeown, and Lead Delegate and Past-President Cynthia M. Rufe nominated ROLI and were honored to accept the award on their behalf. Judge McKeown read a thank-you message from ROLI’s Chair, retired Supreme Court Associate Justice Stephen Breyer. Please see photos, below.



President Sessa has also proposed to the United Nations that it honor judicial independence by bringing attention to the difficult circumstances that befall our colleagues in certain countries when they make unpopular judicial rulings. Imprisonment, cessation of pay, threats of violence, and even death are ongoing reactions to judges who rule with integrity and ethics. Please refer to his letter published earlier naming **January 11 “International Day of Judicial Independence-1000 Robes March”**.

The Central Council also created the **IAJ Assistance Fund Committee** for members of the judiciary who are detained or suspended and who find themselves or their families in need of funds for legal expenses or even living expenses. Donations can be made directly to the fund. Working alongside this initiative is the **IAJ WORKING GROUP ON ASSISTANCE TO JUDGES**, which was formed in 2019 at the annual meeting in Kazakhstan. The group's assistance can take non-monetary forms when judges find themselves in peril. Please see the below link to the website page established for this group. Judge Cynthia M. Rufe has been a member of this group since inception.

IAJ WORKING GROUP ON ASSISTANCE TO JUDGES

IAJ SUPPORT FOR 1000 ROBES DAY 2024

Look for *CAPE TOWN NEWS PART II* in the January newsletter to learn about the IAJ Education program themed on Artificial Intelligence for the Courts, highlighting lead presenters Margaret McKeown and Marilyn Huff. Also to be provided are final reports of the four Study Commissions and the report of the geographical group ANAO, led by FJA Past-President Allyson Duncan, now a Vice-Chair of the IAJ.

Membership

Chair: Nannette Jolivette Brown

On December 4, 2024, the Membership Committee hosted a reception at the Phoenix Park Hotel in Washington, DC to celebrate new judges during their Phase II training. More than 70 people attended the reception, including 44 new judges, faculty judges from the Phase II training, and staff from the FJC, Sentencing Commission, and Administrative Office. Membership Chair Nannette Jolivette Brown and Treasurer Mal Mannion welcomed the attendees and explained the many benefits of FJA membership. 30 of the new judges in attendance recently joined the FJA, and several non-members became members that very night. The reception was a resounding success, offering an invaluable opportunity for networking and fostering connections. Attendees praised the event for its warm atmosphere and for offering a meaningful platform to engage with the FJA's mission and community.





Do you remember when you were a new judge? Were there things you wish you knew then that you know now? The Membership Committee is creating a *Top 10 Things I Wish I Knew* list for new judges. Your ideas would be very helpful in creating this list. Please submit ideas to: fja@federaljudgesassoc.org.



The Membership Committee welcomes the following new members to the FJA:

Adam B. Abelson (D. Md.)
Amy M. Baggio (D. Or.)
Susan K. DeClercq (E.D. Mich.)
Mary Kay Lanthier (D. Vt.)
Eumi K. Lee (N.D. Cal.)
Stacy D. Neumann (D. Me.)

The following judges have been confirmed recently. Please join us in welcoming them to the judiciary and encourage their membership in the FJA!

Byron B. Conway (E.D. Wis.)
Michelle Williams Court (C.D. Cal.)
Jonathan E. Hawley (C.D. Ill.)
April M. Perry (N.D. Ill.)
Jeannette A. Vargas (S.D.N.Y.)

In Memoriam

The FJA mourns the loss of the following members:

Helen "Ginger" Berrigan
U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana



The judges of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana sadly announce that their esteemed colleague, retired Senior Judge Helen “Ginger” Berrigan, passed away on the evening of November 15, 2024, in Saddle River, New Jersey, after a long illness. Judge Berrigan was nominated by President Bill Clinton to a seat on the Eastern District of Louisiana bench on November 18, 1993, was confirmed by the Senate on March 10, 1994, and received her commission on the same day. She served as the Chief Judge of the court from 2001 until 2008 and assumed senior status on August 23, 2016. “She was a mentor and a friend,”

said Chief Judge Nannette Jolivette Brown. “Judge Berrigan was beloved and respected by judges across the judiciary for her compassion and her intellect. She will be sorely missed,” Brown added. “On behalf of the court we extend our sincere condolences to her family and many friends,” said Brown. Together with her family and friends, the New Orleans Chapter of the Federal Bar Association is planning a memorial for Judge Berrigan on January 16, 2025 at 4:00 PM in the Eastern District of Louisiana en banc courtroom.

Read more about Judge Berrigan's judicial legacy [here](#).

Walter K. Stapleton **U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit**

It is with great sadness that the Judges of the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit note the passing of our dear friend and colleague, the Honorable Walter K. Stapleton. Judge Stapleton passed away at the age of ninety on November 23, 2024.



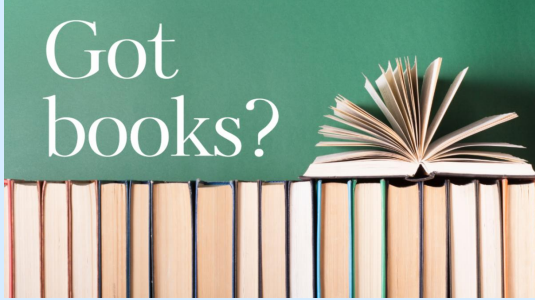
Speaking on behalf of the Court of Appeals, Chief Judge Michael A. Chagares observed that “Walt Stapleton served the federal judiciary with distinction for more than five decades, a remarkable tenure that included service on the United States District Court for the District of Delaware and later the Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. Whether presiding at trial or on appeal, Judge Stapleton was universally admired as a model of integrity and fairness on the bench. Judge Stapleton was thoughtful, dedicated to his craft, and an exemplar of the spirit of collegiality valued by our Circuit. He was beloved by his law clerks and judicial colleagues alike, and a joy to be around professionally and personally. His wisdom, humor, and grace will be missed. While my colleagues and I are deeply saddened by Judge Stapleton’s passing, we will continue to cherish his legacy as a member of our Court and the Third Circuit community.”

Read the full [press release](#), or see [Judge Stapleton's obituary](#).

Quadrennial
April 27-29, 2026 in Washington, D.C.
Co-Chairs: Cathy Bissoon and Sara Darrow

Book Fair Survey

The FJA Quadrennial Book Fair has become a much-anticipated part of FJA's Quadrennial



Conference, an event for federal judges and their guests held every four years in Washington, D.C. The committee is excited to host another Book Fair at the upcoming 2026 Quadrennial and needs your help in identifying books and authors to highlight, specifically, books authored by our very own members. Please take a quick moment to answer this survey so that we can begin compiling a comprehensive list of books and authors for the

2026 Quadrennial Book Fair.

Thank you in advance for your participation. Please feel free to reach out to the FJA with any questions at fja@federaljudgesassoc.org or (888) 329-1941.

Sincerely,

- Judge Debra Brown (N.D. Miss.)
- Judge Marina Garcia Marmolejo (S.D. Tex.)
- Judge Robert Lasnik (W.D. Wa.)
- Judge Jack McConnell (D.R.I.)

[Complete Survey Here](#)

Members in the News



Member Judges around the country are actively involved in civics and service to the community. The FJA gives a shout-out to the following members:



Lawyers Club of Philadelphia Honors Chief Judge Juan R. Sánchez



The Philadelphia Lawyers Club bestowed its annual Federal Judiciary Award upon Hon. Juan R. Sánchez, District Judge and former Chief Judge of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, on October 10. Speaking to over 120 guests gathered for a reception at the Byrne Courthouse, the club’s president, Mohammed Bakry, lauded Judge Sánchez’s years of innovative and energetic leadership, including during the COVID pandemic and an extended government shutdown.

The club also recognized Judge Sánchez’s continued involvement in the community, his focus on meaningfully addressing experiential diversity in all levels of the Court, and in promoting respectful dialogue with all nine counties in the District.

Judge Sánchez thanked the large gathering of lawyers and colleagues with special appreciation reserved for his COVID “Kitchen Cabinet” of E.D. Pa. Judges: Hon. Timothy J. Savage, Hon. Paul S. Diamond, Hon. Nitza I. Quiñones Alejandro, Hon. Jeffrey Schmehl, Hon. Joshua D. Wolson, and Hon. Gerald A. McHugh.

“Civility is a cornerstone of the legal profession,” said Judge Sánchez in his remarks. “Yet there is much concern among bench and bar alike that civility in our profession continues to decline. Events like this one, where judges and lawyers from all types of practice can come together in an informal setting, do much to counteract the decline. Equally important is the help you provide to members undergoing personal crisis. Thank you for your work.”

Pictured above is Philadelphia Lawyers Club President Mohammed Bakry left, presenting Judge Sánchez with the club’s annual Federal Judiciary Award.

Announcements

**Just the Beginning Announces
2025 Summer Judicial Internship Diversity Project**

JTB invites you to participate in the Summer Judicial Internship Diversity (“SJID”) Project by hosting a law student as a summer intern in your chambers in the summer of 2025. The Project is a partnership between the Judicial Conference’s Committee on Judicial Resources (“JRC”) and Just the Beginning—A Pipeline Organization (“JTB”), which is an organization that encourages underrepresented students to pursue career and leadership opportunities in the law. Click the button below to learn more.

[Learn More](#)

Upcoming Events



FJA 2025 Board Meeting

The 2025 Board Meeting has been scheduled for April 2 - 4, 2025 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We are excited to host the 2025 Board Meeting at The Green Federal Building with a reception and dinner to follow at the National Constitution Center. We look forward to providing additional details in the near future.

January Edition | *The Bench Press*

Have a submission for the upcoming edition of The Bench Press? Please share it by **January 9, 2025**. We would love to share your special news with the membership. [Email us!](#)

[Email Us Your News](#)



J. Michelle Childs
President

Mary Scriven

Communications Committee Chair

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