

National Judicial College names 60 Courageous Judges to mark its 60th anniversary

As it observes the 60th anniversary of its founding, The National Judicial College has compiled a list of 60 Courageous Judges.

Founded in 1963 and headquartered in Reno, Nevada, since 1964, the NJC is the country's oldest, largest and most widely attended school for judges. The college unveiled its list of 60 Courageous Judges at its final 60th anniversary celebration of the year, Dec. 7 in Las Vegas.

The list includes well-known figures from history, such as Frank M. Johnson, the federal judge in the Rosa Parks back-of-the bus trial in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956. But the overwhelming majority of the honorees are lesser-known state-court and administrative law judges from around this country and, in a few cases, from foreign countries. There are four tribal judges. Ten of the honorees, including Johnson, are deceased.

Said NJC President Benes Z. Aldana: "We hope this list raises people's awareness of and appreciation for the thousands of steadfast judges who keep the promise of equal justice under law every day, including those days when it would be more popular or convenient for them to do something else."

The list was drawn from nominations submitted by the College's alumni, faculty, staff and others associated with the NJC. An internal committee headed by President Aldana made the final selections, relying almost exclusively on the examples of courage described by the nominators.

Many of the judges were recognized for honoring their vow to follow the law and Constitution in the face of contrary public opinion, political pressure, and threats to personal safety.

Several of the honorees attended the award ceremony in Las Vegas, and three spoke, including Montana District Court Judge Kathy Seeley.

In August of this year, Judge Seeley made headlines nationally by ruling in favor of 16 youth plaintiffs who argued that Montana's fossil fuel policies violated the state's own constitutionally guaranteed right to a healthy environment. The ruling was unpopular with the conservative majority in Montana, a state rich in oil and natural-gas deposits.

The 60 honorees in alphabetical order. * = deceased



Hon. William Alsup

Senior Judge, United States District Court, Northern District of California

In 2017, while presiding over a case involving claims related to climate change, he took the unprecedented step of organizing a climate science tutorial in the courtroom in an effort to reach an informed decision in the case.



Hon. Victor Bolden

United States District Judge for the District of Connecticut

In 2023 he ruled that a famed forensic scientist, Henry Lee, fabricated evidence that led to the 1989 murder convictions of two men. He granted a motion for summary judgment in a lawsuit against Dr. Lee. A different judge vacated the murder convictions in 2020.



Hon. James T. Brand*

Oregon Supreme Court Justice; Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal member

Justice Brand was the presiding judge of the Nuremberg panel that adjudicated the guilt of high-ranking Nazi judges, Ministry of Justice officials, and prosecutors. He is thought to have been the inspiration for Spencer Tracy's portrayal of Judge Dan Haywood in the popular 1961 movie Judgment at Nuremberg.



Hon. John Browning

Retired Justice of Texas's Fifth District Court of Appeals

A White judge in a conservative state, he has for years worked for the posthumous bar admission of minority aspiring lawyers from the 19th and early 20th centuries who were denied admission to the bar because of the color of their skin.



Hon. Charles Patrick Burns

Cook County (Illinois) Circuit Court Judge

National leader in the treatment court field whose drug court, which has operated for 13 years, has earned a national mentor court designation from the Bureau of Justice Assistance. He was voted into the Stanley Goldstein Hall of Fame by AllRise (previously known as the National Association of Drug Court Professionals).



Hon. Adrienne N. Heely Caires

Hawaii Family Court Judge

Evacuated during this year's fires on Maui, she continued to come to work to help children and families in Family Court. That included making sure that foster children were safe. She found new shelters and provided psychological first aid for many.



Hon. Dennis Challeen*

District Court Judge, Winona, Minnesota

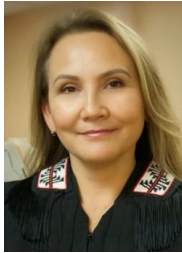
Longtime National Judicial College faculty member and sentencing-reform advocate who is credited with inventing the concept of sentencing to community service in 1972.



Hon. Samuel B. Cole

Federal Immigration Judge

For the past five years, Judge Cole has served as litigation lead counsel in a number of very high-profile legal battles with the U.S. Department of Justice with the aim of preserving judicial independence for the immigration judge corps.



Hon. Leona Colegrove

Chief Judge of the Quinault Tribal Court in Washington state

She led the development of the Quinault Adult, Family, & Juvenile Wellness Courts. She also led the creation of the joint jurisdiction Hoopa Valley-Humboldt County Wellness Court.



Hon. Angela M. Cox

Florida Circuit Court Judge

Beat the odds as a youngster from a violent Detroit neighborhood, where her older brother was murdered, to become the first African-American woman appointed to the circuit bench in Florida's 4th Judicial Circuit. As the Dean of the Florida Judicial College, she is the first woman and African-American to lead the college in its almost 50-year history.



Hon. Eric Dooyema

Chief Judge, Spokane (Washington) Tribal Court

Known as a fair and impartial judge with a history of ignoring political pressure and is not afraid to make rulings that could jeopardize his position on the bench.



Hon. Marguerite Denise Downing

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge

Former public defender who recognized the issues incarcerated parents faced in trying to participate in dependency cases. Formed a countywide stakeholders work group to identify and eliminate barriers to reunification and participation. Currently trains attorneys and judges across the nation on the effects of parental incarceration on children in the child welfare system.



Hon. Danielle Ta'Sheena Finn

Associate Judge, Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe

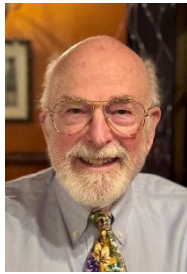
Drives six hours each day to appear in court. Known for effectively balancing contemporary legal standards with cultural customs.



Hon. Tommy Fowler

Judge, Craighead County (Arkansas) District Court

Upon taking office in 2017, Judge Fowler terminated the services of a private, for-profit probation company that had been operating illegally in Craighead County for decades. In response, the company sued him in federal court in his individual and professional capacity. The probation company was known for its predatory practices and for using the court as an arm of its collection operations. After 2½ years, the case was dismissed by the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals on the grounds of judicial immunity.



Hon. Robert Robinson Gales

Chief Administrative Judge, Defense Department Office of Hearings and Appeals

Stood up to Department of Defense officials who complained that the administrative judges in the Defense Office of Hearings and Appeals were going too far in ensuring due process. The department backed down.



Hon. Maya Guerra Gamble

Presiding Judge, 459th District Court of Travis County, Texas

Presided, with intense media scrutiny, over the *Heslin v. Jones* trial that arose out of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones accusing parents of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting victims of being actors in a hoax. She received harassment and threats for her rulings against Jones and also for issuing a TRO blocking a law that would allow private citizens to sue anyone who “aids or abets” abortion after six weeks.



Hon. Ishfaq Ahmad Ghazi

Civil Judge, Judicial Magistrate, District Khyber, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Served as a judge during the peak of terrorist activity in his jurisdiction, a region where people are also skeptical of government-administered justice.



Hon. Donna Leone Hamm

Retired lower-court judge in Coconino and Maricopa counties, Arizona

In 1981 she initiated new ways for defendants to resolve convictions, including many community-service projects. She stood firm when county commissioners objected because community-service sentences reduced county revenues from fines. In retirement she leads a prison-reform organization.



Hon. Paul G. Hatfield*

Judge of the United States District Court for the District of Montana

During a brief tenure in the United States Senate, when he filled a seat vacated by the death of the incumbent, Judge Hatfield cast the deciding vote approving President Jimmy Carter’s Panama Canal Treaty. He knew the vote would be extremely unpopular in Montana, and, in fact, it cost him his retention election. But he considered it the right decision. The primary candidate who defeated Hatfield called him “one of the most decent and thoughtful people I've had the privilege of knowing.”



Hon. Peggy Fulton Hora*

California Superior Court Judge (Alameda County)

Longtime National Judicial College faculty member who established the second drug treatment court in the United States. She was also the first woman judge in southern Alameda County. After retiring from the bench, she promoted treatment and problem-solving courts all over the world.



Hon. Robin Hudson

Retired Associate Justice, North Carolina Supreme Court

Authored a 2022 opinion striking down North Carolina legislative and congressional districts as partisan gerrymanders that violated the state constitution. The U.S. Supreme Court reversed that part of the opinion but agreed with her that the "independent state legislature" theory was inconsistent with the U.S. Constitution.



Hon. Frank Minis Johnson*

Judge of the United States District Court and Circuit Court of Appeals

Made landmark civil rights rulings in cases, such as the Rosa Parks back-of-the-bus case, that helped end segregation and disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South.



Hon. Joel Ballard Johnson

Texas District Court Senior Judge

Small-town judge known for upholding the rule of law in the face of criticism. He was also known for modeling humility in court by eschewing a robe and sitting in the same chairs afforded defendants, jurors, attorneys and spectators.



Hon. Robert J. Johnston

Former U.S. Magistrate Judge

During most of his career he quietly visited Nevada prisons to listen to and teach inmates.



Hon. Leslie D. King

Mississippi Supreme Court Presiding Justice

In an extremely conservative state, he adhered to the rule of law as established in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (gay marriage) shortly after the Supreme Court's decision came down.



Hon. Michael Luttig

Former Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the 4th Circuit

Republican who convinced Mike Pence that the vice president had no authority to overturn President Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election. His running mate, President Trump, insisted otherwise.



Hon. Alli Majeed

Retired Florida County Court Judge

Muslim immigrant from humble beginnings who, against many people's advice, quit his job as a prosecutor and ran for judge in a very conservative county. He won, repeatedly.



Hon. Roy J. Manfredi

Municipal Court Judge in Raton, New Mexico

In 2013, when New Mexico made gay marriage legal, every other judge in Colfax County chose to stop performing ALL marriages in protest. Judge Manfredi chose to follow the law and continued to perform all marriages in the face of public sentiment against his stance.



Hon. Karen Elizabeth Mayberry

Retired Chief Appellate Judge, U.S. Air Force Court of Criminal Appeals

For three years she served as chief defense counsel for the U.S. Military Commissions at the U.S. Naval Station, Guantanamo, Cuba. In that role, she oversaw the individual civilian and military defense counsel providing ethically required legal representation for alien detainees confined for alleged terrorist acts against the United States. These acts included the 9/11 attacks and the bombing of the USS Cole.



Hon. Patrick F. McAllister

Surrogates Court Judge, Steuben County, New York

Struck down a congressional districting map drawn by the state legislature for being unconstitutionally gerrymandered. The Court of Appeals upheld his decision.



Hon. Karen Morris

Brighton (New York) Town Justice

Created Ticket2Ride, an organization that raises money to provide free bus passes to indigent defendants so they can attend court and parole and probation meetings, among other appointments. This reduces bench warrants, wasteful diversion of police time, and unnecessary jail nights.



Hon. Constance Baker Motley*

Judge of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York

From the late 1940s through the early 1960s, she played a pivotal role in the fight to end racial segregation. She often put her own safety at risk in one racially charged situation after another. She was the first African American woman to argue a case before the Supreme Court and the first to serve as a federal judge.



Hon. Sophie Nomee

Associate and Traditional Judge for the Colville Tribal Court

Has represented tribes at many Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) and opiate conferences while enduring many personal hardships, including the loss of her son and her husband.



Maureen O'Connor

Former Chief Justice of the Ohio Supreme Court

Demonstrated judicial independence and devotion to the rule of law when she was the lone Republican on the Ohio Supreme Court who consistently ruled that members of her own party had drafted political districts that were unconstitutionally gerrymandered. Ohio's first female chief justice, she served in a statewide elected office longer than any woman in Ohio history.



Hon. Patrick Oishi

Presiding Judge, King County (Washington) Superior Court

Born and raised on Maui to public educator parents, Judge Oishi taught seventh grade before attending law school. As a prosecutor, he tried more than 90 jury trials. Judge Oishi overcame cultural norms rooted in his Japanese heritage by pursuing a judicial career. He has strived to improved diversity in the legal profession by mentoring diverse law students and attorneys. Judge Oishi is King County Superior Court's first Presiding Judge of color in 30 years.



Hon. Shanta Owens

Alabama Circuit Court Judge

In 2022, Judge Owens formally dismissed charges against two African-American men in Alabama who had been convicted of rape in 1993 and had spent two decades behind bars. She ruled that they had been wrongfully convicted because the state withheld exculpatory evidence from the defense whereby a police report showed that the victim identified another individual as the perpetrator of the crime.



Hon. Aaron R. Petty

Appellate Immigration Judge, U.S. Board of Immigration Appeals

From October 2022 to March 2023, Petty, who is a major in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, deployed to various locations in Africa as the chief legal advisor for a Special Operations Task Group. He provided legal support for missions ranging from medical evacuations to diplomatic engagement.



Hon. James L. Pohl

Retired U.S. Army Judge

While serving as the presiding judge in the Abu Ghraib prison-abuse cases, he countermanded the order of President George W. Bush by stopping the demolition of the prison because it was a crime scene. He later insisted that due process and the rights of the accused be respected when he presided over the military commission trial of five prisoners at the U.S. base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The defendants were accused of planning and aiding the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.



Hon. David M. Porter

Polk County (Iowa) District Court Judge

Has refused to bow to political pressure and concerns for his own safety while overseeing the high-profile case of Pieper Lewis, a young woman who at age 15 killed a man to whom she had been sex trafficked.



Hon. Jacob L. Rambo

California Public Utilities Commission

In 2018, he received increasing pressure from managers at a former employer to rule more favorably toward the agencies from which he heard appeals. He was later confronted by a supervisor and pressured to change an adverse ruling against the state. He later disclosed extensive ex parte communications between the employer's counsel and the chief judge.



Hon. Kristin L. Rosi

Chief Administrative Law Judge, California Department of Insurance

Champion of judicial independence who guards against potential political influence at California's Department of Insurance Administrative Hearing Bureau. She also serves as president of the International Association of LGBTQ+ Judges, as programs chair of the ABA Judicial Division, and as chair of the State Bar of California's Council on Access and Fairness.



Hon. Larry Guy Sage

Retired Judge of the Sparks (Nevada) Municipal Court

Decorated Army veteran who helped create Nevada's first limited jurisdiction Alcohol & Other Drug Court and the first Native American Driving Under the Influence Victim Impact Panel for the Washoe, Paiute and Shoshone tribes. During three years in war-torn Afghanistan, he trained judges and prosecutors. As a peace monitor in South Sudan, he located dozens of child soldiers, later freed.



Hon. Esther Salas

Judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey

Survived a gunman's attack at her home in 2020 that killed her son and seriously wounded her husband. She now often speaks publicly and works to pass legislation giving greater protection to judges, including measures to keep their home addresses private.



Hon. Burton A. Scott*

Chief Judge of the Wisconsin Court of Appeals

Former associate dean of The National Judicial College who was known for standing up to administrative officers as chief judge to defend the independence of the appellate court.



Hon. Collins J. Seitz*

Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit

During his tenure as chancellor of the Delaware Court of Chancery, he ruled on a case later combined with several other cases into the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. He determined that segregation was intrinsically discriminatory but that the Supreme Court forbade a ruling on such a basis in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which established the doctrine of separate but equal. Despite this limitation, he ruled that conditions were unequal and that the only remedy that could suffice was integration.



Hon. Kathy Seeley

District Court Judge in Helena, Montana

Made headlines nationally in 2023 with her landmark ruling in a case brought 16 youth plaintiffs. The group argued that the state's fossil fuel policies violated Montana's own constitutionally guaranteed right to a healthy environment. The ruling was particularly unpopular in Montana, a state rich in oil and natural-gas deposits.



Hon. Waqar Ahmad Seth*

Chief Justice of Peshawar (Pakistan) High Court

Judicial leader who stood for constitutionalism, independence of the judiciary, and protection of fundamental rights and civil liberties as enshrined in the Constitution of Pakistan.



Hon. John T. Simpson

Coweta (Georgia) Superior Court Chief Judge

Repeatedly challenged the status quo by creating Parent Accountability, Drug, and Veterans' courts that have collected millions of dollars, dramatically shortened wait times, kept people out of jail and become model courts statewide and nationally.



Hon. Thomas Tang*

Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit

Lost re-election as a juvenile court judge in Maricopa County, Arizona, after he sentenced two teenage juveniles who had killed another high school student to probation until they turned 21. He argued that a juvenile court's principal aims should be "correction, rehabilitation and treatment."



Hon. Elizabeth Frances Tavitias

Judge of the Indiana Court of Appeals

Former prosecutor, juvenile defender, juvenile court referee, and family court judge in Gary, Indiana, who was known for serving troubled children and families. She chaired a statewide task force that has proposed guardian ad litem guidelines for civil family law cases.



Hon. Niki Tobi*

Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of Nigeria

First Nigerian judge to uphold women's rights to inheritance. Known also for his work to advance Nigeria's democracy.



Hon. Lissette Toro Vélez

Regional Administrative Judge, Ponce Region, Commonwealth of Puerto Rico

After experiencing first-hand the severe impacts of climate change in the island nation, she received a recognition as a Judicial Leader in Climate Science with education in climate change. She is now a leader regarding the rise in climate-change-related litigation and has promoted an educational program for judges and other government officials on the matter.



Hon. Lisa Walsh

Miami-Dade County (Florida) Circuit Court Judge

Leader of a special program of the National Association of Women Judge's that is assisting more than 30 refugee Afghan judges in the United States.



Hon. Reggie Walton

Senior United States District Court Judge for the District of Columbia

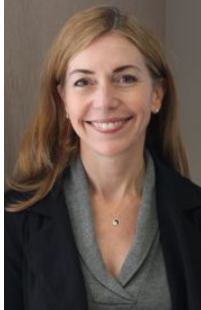
A judge known for his integrity in handling several high-profile cases, including those of Trump supporters accused of attacking the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2020, and Scooter Libby, the then-chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney. Libby was convicted of leaking the identity of a CIA agent.



Hon. Monica F. Wiley

Supervising Judge, San Francisco Unified Family Court

Has spent the majority of her judicial career working in family law and working with system-involved youth to ensure that they are both held accountable and have the opportunity and resources to take a different path. Also involved in raising sometimes unpopular judicial education issues, including implicit bias and its impact on decision making



Hon. Noël Wise

Judge of the Superior Court of Alameda County, California

In the wake of intense scrutiny directed at the criminal justice system following the police killing of George Floyd, she became the first California judge to write that all judges have an ethical obligation to speak out against racial injustice. Her article is now part of the statewide curriculum in the mandatory New Judges Orientation program.



Hon. Rhonda K. Wood

Associate Justice, Arkansas Supreme Court

Co-host of the Lady Justice: Women of the Court podcast, which educates the public about the role of state courts. Launched in 2020, it is the only podcast hosted by both sitting and former justices of state supreme courts, and it focuses on the hosts' experiences on their state's highest court.



Hon. Genevieve Woody

Navajo Nation Tribal Court District Judge in Shiprock, New Mexico

Judge near the border of the Navajo Nation who has presided over history-making cases. In 2016 she found a fellow Navajo Nation judge guilty of abusing his office and ordered him to forfeit his position.



Hon. E. Kenneth Wright

Presiding Judge, Municipal Department, Circuit Court of Cook County, Illinois

Judicial innovator, mentor and frequent public voice for the judiciary who heads the largest district in Cook County, which includes Chicago. Judge Wright is known for eschewing the safe approach in hiring clerks. Instead he often gives opportunities to first-generation college graduates and young people who, often for reasons beyond their control, might not appear on paper to be star candidates. His innovations include creating a Flex Court for people who can't afford to attend court during business hours.



Hon. Nandakishor Prasad Yadav

District Judge, Bajhang, Nepal

Judge whose docket includes organized crime cases in Nepal. In 2021 the country finally achieved the standards to graduate from the United Nations' list of Least Developed Countries.

*** Deceased**