

## Promoting Diversity in the Courts. Hon. Joanne D. Quiñones

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, news and insights from the New York courts. I'm John Caher and I am pleased and honored to welcome to this Diversity Dialogue segment Supreme Court Justice Joanne D. Quiñones of Brooklyn.

Justice Quiñones was first appointed to the bench in 2010 by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, elevated to acting Supreme Court Justice in 2017, and confirmed by the New York State Senate in 2022 as a judge of the New York State Court of Claims.

In 2023, she was elected to the Supreme Court. A graduate of Brown University and Fordham University School of Law, Justice Quiñones serves on the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission, the Advisory Committee on Judicial Ethics, and also serves as Chair of the Second Judicial District's Equal Justice Committee.

Justice Quiñones is a champion of mentoring programs, and every year takes on scores of young people as interns and mentees for what is affectionately known as "Camp Quiñones." She frequently speaks on issues of diversity, inclusion and the elimination of bias.

Judge, thank you for coming on the program. Your public record is obviously public. Today, I'd like to delve a little deeper to understand the woman behind the robe, so let's turn the clock back a little bit. Where were you born?

Justice Quiñones: Okay, so I was born in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn, and I'm not talking about the hip, cool, "it" place Bushwick of today. I'm talking about the Bushwick of the '70s, the very poor Bushwick that no one wanted to be near, no one wanted to visit, no one wanted to live there. And nowadays, miraculously, it's really coming to its own. There are buses filled with tourists making stops all over Bushwick. Everyone wants to live there now. The Bushwick of the '70s was very poor, drug ridden, lots of abandoned homes, that sort of thing.

John Caher: What was life like for you as a kid growing up in Bushwick in the '70s.

Justice Quiñones: The neighborhood was mostly Black and Latino. The Latinos were mostly Puerto Ricans. Afterwards, it evolved. There were some Dominicans, there were some Asian families that came into Bushwick. Then lots of Central American Latinos.

When I was growing up there, there was also a very big Muslim presence in the neighborhood. There was a mosque right on Bushwick Avenue, just a couple of blocks away from my elementary school. So we went to school with the Muslim children who lived in the Muslim community. They would come together, escorted to school as a group, and they were in our classes and stuff.

As an adult, I've read a lot about Bushwick and the changes, and I also came across all of these stories and articles. I believe that even Jacqueline Woodson wrote a book about the many arson fires in Bushwick in the '70s, but I don't have any independent recollection of that. The only thing that I remember vividly from the 70s and growing up in Bushwick was the blackout of 1977. I remember sitting on the front stoop with my family because everything was dark inside. So we were outside with groups of people or what have you, and hearing and seeing what was going on, the looting, the people trying to... Basically just spending time in the street because it was so dark and everyone just didn't want to be indoors.

John Caher: So, it sounds like you had a multicultural education just by virtue of where you lived.

Justice Quiñones: Absolutely: Latino, Black, Muslims, Asians, and most of my teachers were white. So I grew up at a very multicultural kind of school, I would say. My neighborhood was mostly Black and Latino, but in school I was exposed to everyone else.

John Caher: How does that shape you, do you think?

Justice Quiñones: I think it definitely made me the person I am today.

One, I grew up in a very, very Latino, very, very proud Puerto Rican family, so I am fiercely proud of being Puerto Rican. I don't know if you heard or saw anything about my induction, but the ceremonial unit, one of them carried a Puerto Rican flag. There was also a second Puerto Rican flag. I walked into a salsa song that talked about being born and raised in Puerto Rico. But growing up in a neighborhood where there were so many different people really made me more attuned to people, to our differences, our similarities. It made me more sensitive to people's unique situations and really made me the person that I am today who's so committed to diversity and equity and inclusion.

John Caher: Tell me about your parents.

Justice Quiñones: So my mother was employed with the Brooklyn Public Library, and she was the disciplinarian and the driving force in our home. My dad worked at a factory and he often worked double shifts and arrived home long after we had gone to bed. Both my parents were born in Puerto Rico. They came to New York as youths, my dad at age 10, and my mom as a teenager. Both of my parents really stressed the importance of education and were very encouraging of my educational and extracurricular pursuits, whether it was the Prep for Prep program, which is an educational and leadership program for students of color that I was accepted into at about age 11, or whether it was my ballet classes, because I thought I was going to be like some great ballerina one day. But they truly made me believe that I could be anything that I wanted to be.

John Caher: And it sounds like they also instilled quite the work ethic.

Justice Quiñones: Yes, absolutely. They were hard workers. Very hard workers.

John Caher: Who were your major childhood role models? Was it your parents or others?

Justice Quiñones: Well, certainly my mother. I mean, my mother is this strong and independent woman. She always was. I simultaneously admired her and feared her. Like I said, she was a disciplinarian. My dad was not. My teachers, my teachers took a real interest in me and encouraged me to do my very best.

And I loved and still love Wonder Woman. I remember watching her on TV. She was this fiercely independent woman warrior, she lived on an island that was inhabited and governed by women only. So I love everything Wonder Woman. In fact, my entire office is decorated in Wonder Woman memorabilia!

John Caher: Oh, that's great. That is wonderful! So at Brown University, I think you were a pre-med student before you decided to switch gears and become a lawyer. What caused that switch? What attracted you to the practice of law?

Justice Quiñones: I think it was more what repelled me from the pre-med field.

As a senior, I was taking Organic Chemistry and for some reason I didn't get along with "orgo" and "orgo" didn't get along with me, so I dropped the class. It was actually the last prerequisite that I needed to complete for my pre-med requirements, so I was very, very far along. And I figured out that med school wasn't going to be the right track for me because I

didn't want to go through that first year of med school dealing with blood. I can't even give blood without fainting at the sight of it!

But I knew that I wanted to work with children, so I went to law school with the hope that I could become a child advocate. My dream job throughout law school was either the Children's Defense Fund in Washington DC or the Legal Aid Society's Juvenile Rights Division here in the city. But you know, one has to be flexible and when opportunity knocks, you answer the door. So last year at Fordham Law School, I was offered a position as a staff attorney with the Legal Aid Society's Criminal Defense Division, so I took it and, well, the rest is history because as you know, in my 13 plus years as a judge, I've mostly presided over criminal matters.

John Caher:

Now, you were, I imagine, in college, by the time that Carmen Beauchamp Ciparick became the first Hispanic ever appointed to the Court of Appeals back in 1993, which really isn't all that long ago. Today, there are two judges, Jenny Rivera and Michael Garcia, the Chief Administrative Judge, the Honorable Justice Zayas, has roots in Puerto Rico. What can we say about the progress that has been made and what can we say about the mountains left to climb?

Justice Quiñones:

Clearly, progress has been made right, like you said. Now, three people have served on the Court of Appeals of Latino decent. We have the Chief Administrative Judge, the first ever Latino serving in that position. We've had two Latinos serve as Presiding Justices of the Appellate Division, First Department. We have currently a Latino Presiding Justice of the Second Department. Recently, there were more Latinos appointed to the Appellate Division. So we certainly made some progress.

I still think that we have a long, long way to go. The number of Latino judges, much like the number of Asian judges, is still very, very small in comparison to our populations in New York City and New York State as a whole. The number of Latino male judges is very, very low. And like I said, I just got inducted as a Supreme Court Justice, and people need role models because and you can't be what you can't see, which is something that Marian Wright Edelman said, who's the founder of the Children's Defense Fund.

I never believed that I could become a Supreme Court Judge in Brooklyn because there were no Latinas in that role. It wasn't until 1997, the year I graduated from law school, that the first Latina was elected to the Supreme Court in Brooklyn, and that was the Honorable Betsy Barros, who now sits at the Appellate Division, Second Department.

But to date, the number of Latinos who have been elected to either Civil Court or Supreme Court in Brooklyn, which is where I live, is very, very, very minuscule. Sad to say, but we definitely have a lot more to do in order to even the playing field, if you will.

John Caher: Did you say the numbers are particularly low for Hispanic *males*?

Justice Quiñones: Yes, yes. And I think Black men as well. I mean, nowadays, most of the people who are being elected are women. In New York City, at least.

John Caher: That's interesting.

Justice Quiñones: Yeah.

John Caher: Do you have any judicial role models, either in New York or nationally?

Justice Quiñones: I considered the judge for whom I served as a court attorney for 10 years, the Honorable Matthew Cooper a role model. I've often said that by giving me the opportunity and the privilege to serve as his court attorney, Judge Cooper opened doors for me that I never anticipated walking through. He definitely gave me access to a system and court system that before then I had little to no access to, even as an attorney with the Legal Aid Society and whatnot. Judge Cooper really took me under his wing. He let me see it all. He taught me what a judge should do, what a judge should not do, and he was great.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the consummate wise Latina, is somebody I look up to. Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, who's the first African American woman and the first former public defender to serve on the US Supreme Court, is somebody I look up to as well. I admire them both because they're trailblazers, I admire them for their commitment to inspiring youth and encouraging future generations of lawyers and judges. And I admire them, quite frankly, for the unapologetic way that they stand by the importance of diverse perspectives in the judiciary, especially in terms of lived and life experiences as equally as important as diversity in terms of racial/ ethnic lines and gender lines and that sort of thing.

John Caher: What do you mean by that?

Justice Quiñones: Meaning that for a long time, people who were former public defenders weren't being considered for judicial roles. It was mostly people who were former prosecutors or people who were in private practice. And I think that when we're talking about diversity, diversity in terms of lived and life experiences is equally as important. People who have been public

defenders have a real unique perspective on the legal system, particularly criminal justice system, and are particularly attuned to safeguarding people's constitutional rights. We're not just talking... I'm not saying that the prosecutors aren't, or former prosecutors aren't, but I'm saying that that's something that-

John Caher: It's coming from a different perspective.

Justice Quiñones: Yes, absolutely.

John Caher: Two people can be in a courtroom and see the same thing unfold, but they're looking at it from a different lens.

Justice Quiñones ...: Correct. You put it so nicely. That's exactly what I was trying to say!

John Caher: Well, thank you.

Justice Quiñones: And that type of diversity is important.

John Caher: So in addition to your day job, which I think keeps you extremely busy, you have all kinds of extracurriculars—Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission, the Judicial Ethics Committee, Equal Justice Committee. You've been involved with many other organizations. I think you were the first Latino ever to serve as a presiding member of the New York State Bar Association's Judicial Section, which is remarkable. You're a past President of the Latino Judges Association, Brooklyn Women's Bar Association. You served on the board for the National Association for Women Judges, the Women's Bar Association of the State of New York. Why do you do all this stuff?

Justice Quiñones: Well, I will just say that I was the first *Latina* to serve as presiding member of the New York State Bar Association's judicial section. Twenty years prior, there was a *Latino* who had served as presiding member of that section. So in the 100 years that section had been around, two of us.

So why have I been so involved in those activities? I guess it's because, to me, being a judge is not just about what you do in the courthouse on the bench, but also about what you do in the community off the bench. So I make time for what's important to me. And what's important to me is to be actively involved in organizations that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, to be an active participant of organizations that are concerned with access to justice issues, and to improving the court's relationship with the community. Some people always joke about that I never sleep, and I was like, well, you have to make time for what's important to you,

so if that means I have to cut down on some sleep, that's what I'm going to do.

John Caher: That's great. And tell me about one particular special program you have, Camp Quiñones.

Justice Quiñones: Camp Quiñones! Camp Quiñones is one of my proudest and most gratifying community experiences. I should say that the name "Camp Quiñones" isn't something I came up with. Every year I take anywhere from eight to 15 interns, ranging in level from high school to law school, with the occasional middle schooler, so that they can kind of see firsthand the ins and outs of our justice system.

In the summer is when I have the most interns at any one time and one summer I had about six interns, and I was going into the Supervising Judge's office to pick up my Chambers mail, and my six interns were following behind me, almost like a little school of fish. So as we were walking into the Supervising Judge's office, one of the secretaries remarked, "Here comes Camp Quiñones," and the name stuck. So that's how we got the name Camp Quiñones. Every summer, I host a reunion for Camp Quiñones alumni. And it's a way for them to catch up with one another, an opportunity to share ideas and resources, a means to inspire and encourage one another.

During COVID, we held the Camp Quiñones reunion via Zoom, but now we're back to in-person meetings. And even throughout the year, we all stay in touch. I text them regularly, they share their accomplishments, their hardships, their ups and downs. They share graduation pictures. But for me, Camp Quiñones highlights the power of mentorship, the importance of pipelines. And my Camp Quiñones alums really give me great hope for the future of our nation. I just feel so honored and privileged to have played even but a small role in their development.

John Caher: I think it's more than a small role, but any particularly inspiring stories from any of your mentees?

Justice Quiñones: I think all of my mentees have inspiring stories. I think each of them is a unique and amazing person who has enhanced my life in so many different ways. And I will say that I was involved with Big Brothers Big Sisters as a big sister since—I'm going to say the early 2000s. And I had one mentee who was being raised by her paternal aunt. Her dad had been incarcerated, her mom had basically abandoned her, and she was 11 when I met her. And then I had another mentee who was 13 at the time. Both of them, and I'm talking about early 2000, had expressed an

interest in becoming a lawyer. The 13-year-old is now a practicing attorney in New York and New Jersey. And the 11-year-old, the then 11-year-old, now a grown person, is a paralegal currently enrolled in law school. So, I'm very, very thrilled to see that they've come full circle, that they've reached where they wanted to be, and I hope that they'll join me as lawyers and later join me on the bench as judges.

John Caher: I can see the joy in your face as you tell me that story. And that brings me back to something you said a second ago that I immediately picked up on and my antenna went off. You talked about the program and how it enhanced *your* life.

Justice Quiñones: Yeah, because so many people think that in a mentoring relationship that the mentor gives, but the mentor gets just as much as the mentor gives, maybe even more so. I never let the young people know that I need them so much more than they probably need me. But, honestly, they energize me. They give me such hope. I see them, and I get excited seeing life all over again through their eyes.

John Caher: That is truly beautiful. Now, in an essay you wrote for the *New York Law Journal* last year, you wrote, and I quote, "For judges, this is not only a time of personal reflection and resolution, but also a time to reflect on the role our courts play in the lives and our justice system." What do you mean by that?

Justice Quiñones: Geez, John, you really did a deep dive on me, huh?

John Caher: I was a reporter for 30 years. What do you expect?

Justice Quiñones: So, I wrote that at the beginning of a new calendar year at a time when all of us, judges and non judges, reflect back on the good, the bad and the ugly of the past year. And we make hopeful promises as we look forward to the new year. And I remember that when I wrote that our Supreme Court, as in the Supreme Court of the United States, had just issued their decision on *Dobbs v Jackson*, and we were all awaiting a decision on the affirmative action, the Students for Fair Admissions against Harvard and UNC. So I think that by saying that, I was really trying to emphasize the magnitude of the role of judges, and that how important it is for us to be mindful of the decisions we make and the wide-ranging and longstanding impacts that our decisions can have on multitudes of people. So that was just kind of my way of emphasizing that point.

John Caher: You did it very nicely.



Now, over the past year, there've been, as you would well know, huge administrative change in New York Court, starting of course with the appointment of Rowan Wilson as a Chief Judge. What are your thoughts about the state court system and the direction that is heading under this new administration?

Justice Quiñones: Upwards and onwards! I am so, so excited about the future of our courts under this leadership team. At my induction, Chief Judge Wilson spoke, Chief Administrative Judge Zayas, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Richardson, and Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Kaplan. And I said to them that I grew up in these courts, so I've seen the good times and the not so good times. And right now we are in very good times. I mean, I appreciate their collaborative leadership style. I appreciate the fact that they listen to the rank and file. I appreciate the fact that they are present. You see them everywhere.

First Deputy Chief Administrator Judge Norman St. George sends emails all the time wishing us good holidays. Whenever it's bad weather, he wishes a safe trip home. This is the kind of caring leadership that I think we have all been longing for for so long. So I am extremely excited. I can't say enough nice things about Chief Judge Wilson. I kid with him that he's like my big brother. We both have freckles. We both have September birthdays.

This is a wonderful group of leaders. Judge Kaplan has been a mentor for me since I was very, very young. In fact, she took me to my first Bar Association event, the Brooklyn Women's Bar Association. It was through her introduction that I got involved in that. And DCAJ Richardson, the Titan of Justice, is just somebody who I so want to be like. She's an amazing person. Her commitment is unwavering. It's a great group. And of course, Joe Zayas, our Chief Administrative Judge, is like a big brother to me. We joke about how I keep following his path. He was a Criminal Court Judge, I was a Criminal Court Judge. He went to the Court of Claims, I went to Court of Claims. He got elected Supreme, I went and elected Supreme. So he's somebody that I really, really look up to and I'm so excited to see that the first Latino Chief Administrative Judge is Joseph Zayas, who is just such an amazing person, both inside and out.

John Caher: We seem to be in like our Camelot era, where it seems like everything is possible.

Justice Quiñones: I agree, totally. Everything is possible with this group. And they make you believe, they give you hope, they encourage you. This is what one wants in a leadership team.

John Caher: So let's go back to your family. Let's turn the focus back on you a little bit.

Justice Quiñones: We were a very tight-knit group. I lived in a four-apartment building. We lived on the second floor. My father's older sister lived on the third floor. My mother's younger sister lived on the fourth floor. So I grew up surrounded by aunts and uncles and cousins. We celebrated the holidays together. They taught us to be very, very, very proud of our culture.

So every holiday was marked by big Puerto Rican meals arroz con gandules, pernil. For Christmas, pasteles. We were taken back to Puerto Rico, my cousins and I were taken back to Puerto Rico regularly because they wanted us to see our family there. They wanted us to be in tune with the Puerto Rican culture from that perspective. In Puerto Rico, around the holidays, there are parrandas, which is like caroling basically. You go from house to house, you're singing outside the house, and then they serve you some food kind of thing.

John Caher: It sounds like family is very, very important to you.

Justice Quiñones: Family is very, very important to me.

John Caher: And finally, a question for the lawyers. What should lawyers know about Justice Joanne D. Quiñones?

Justice Quiñones: I guess maybe that there's so much more to me than the serious, strict person they see on the bench. I mean, I like to have fun. I'm a practical joker. I'm a social butterfly. I'm a people person. And maybe on the more serious side, maybe I would like lawyers to know that I don't expect or demand of them anything that I would not demand or expect of myself. So I would say the three Ps are very important to me: Be prepared, be punctual and present, and be professional. I think that's four Ps, but you get my drift.

John Caher: I do. Well, that's a wonderful way to end it. Judge, thank you so much for your time and for your service.

Justice Quiñones: Thank you so very much.