



2026 FORUM FOR STATE APPELLATE COURT JUDGES

THE FUTURE OF JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE

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FACULTY BIOGRAPHIES

Paper Authors and Speakers



Hon. Cheri Beasley (KEYNOTE SPEAKER) is a distinguished former jurist, private practitioner, law professor, and seasoned arbitrator and mediator. Her legal career has been marked by a series of historic achievements and a deep commitment to public service, the rule of law, and the administration of justice. Chief Justice Beasley began her service on the North Carolina bench in 1999, serving for a decade as a District Court Judge in Cumberland County, where she presided over thousands of civil, family, juvenile, criminal, and traffic cases. In 2008, she was elected to the North Carolina Court of Appeals. In 2012, she became an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of North Carolina, and in 2019, Beasley

became the first African American woman to serve as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of North Carolina. Chief Justice Beasley led the North Carolina Court System through recovery from hurricane-related devastation of local courts and through the pandemic, developing protocols to address health and safety while effectively streamlining cases to allow courts to hear cases safely. Before her judicial career, she served as an assistant public defender in Cumberland County, North Carolina. Chief Justice Beasley received her Bachelor of Arts from Douglass College of Rutgers University, her law degree from the University of Tennessee College of Law, and an L.L.M in judicial studies from Duke University School of Law.



Andre M. Mura (FORUM MODERATOR) represents plaintiffs in class actions and mass torts, including in the areas of consumer protection, privacy, and products liability. Before joining Gibbs Mura, Andre was senior litigation counsel at the Center for Constitutional Litigation PC, where he represented plaintiffs in high-stakes appeals in state supreme courts and federal appellate courts. Andre has been honored twice with a California Lawyer Attorney of the Year Award: in 2023 for his involvement and success at trial in *Patz v. City of San Diego*, and in 2019 for his work in the California Supreme Court in *De La Torre v. CashCall*. Andre currently serves as President of the National Civil Justice Institute, is on the Board

of the Impact Fund, the Civil Justice Research Initiative of Berkeley Law and UC Irvine School of Law, a Fellow of the American Bar Foundation, and a member of the Lawyers Committee of the National Center for State Courts. He received his B.A. from Williams College and his J.D. from the George Washington University Law School.



Hon. Sanjay T. Tailor (WELCOME SPEAKER) was born in Maryland to immigrant parents, grew up in New Jersey and Delaware, and earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in biological sciences from the University of Delaware. After working in a genetics research laboratory for one year, he changed course and went to Loyola University Chicago School of Law, where he earned his Juris Doctor degree with honors. Illinois then became his home. Justice Tailor practiced law as an associate at Chapman and Cutler, as in-house counsel at the First National Bank of Chicago, and as a Cook County Assistant State's Attorney, where he litigated high-profile cases and supervised other assistant state's attorneys.

Before his appointment to the Illinois Supreme Court as its first Asian American justice on January 30, 2026, Justice Tailor served on the trial court for 19 years and the appellate court for four years. Justice Tailor is the court's liaison to the Illinois Judicial College, the body entrusted with the continuing education and training of Illinois judges and their justice partners, including probation officers, court clerks, guardians ad litem, trial court administrators, law clerks, and pre-trial administrators. He is a past commissioner of the Illinois Supreme Court's Commission on Access to Justice, and a board trustee of the Judges Retirement System of Illinois. He previously served on the Illinois Supreme Court's Judicial Performance Evaluation Committee. As an adjunct professor at Loyola, Justice Tailor taught a course on Illinois civil procedure for two decades.



Prof. Adam Sopko (PAPER PRESENTER) is an Associate Professor of Law at the University of Colorado Law School. His research explores questions of state public law with a focus on state courts and state constitutional law. He teaches classes on State Constitutional Law and State and Local Courts. Professor Sopko's work has appeared or is forthcoming in the Northwestern University Law Review, Southern California Law Review, and North Carolina Law Review, among other journals. Professor Sopko received his B.S. from Manhattan College and J.D. from Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, where he was Editor-in-Chief of the Northwestern University Law Review. Following law school, he served as a law clerk

for Chief Justice Stuart J. Rabner on the New Jersey Supreme Court. Before joining the Colorado Law faculty, Professor Sopko was a staff attorney at the State Democracy Research Initiative.



Prof. Mila Versteeg (PAPER PRESENTER) joined the University of Virginia Law School in 2011. Her research and teaching interests include comparative constitutional law, public international law, and empirical legal studies. She has published over 80 articles and book chapters in both legal and social science journals, including the Harvard Law Review. A number of her works have been translated into foreign languages. Her new book, *How CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS MATTER*, won the Best Book Prize for 2019 and 2020 from the International Society of Public Law and the Best Book Award from the Human Rights

Section of the American Political Science Association. In 2017, Versteeg was named an Andrew Carnegie Fellow, which provided her with a \$200,000 award to expand her research into the world's constitutions to better understand how constitutional rights are enforced in different countries. Versteeg has been a visiting professor at a number of prominent universities, including Columbia Law School and the University of Hamburg.

Panelists



Mark Burden is a trial lawyer who concentrates his practice on the defense of physicians, hospitals, and allied healthcare practitioners in professional liability lawsuits. Mr. Burden has successfully resolved hundreds of medical negligence cases and has tried more than 50 cases to verdict. Mr. Burden is a Fellow of the American College of Trial Lawyers, a member of the American Board of Trial Advocates, and will serve as the President (2026 – 2027) of the Society of Trial Lawyers. He has been an invited speaker at numerous bar association CLE presentations and healthcare seminars on such topics as risk management, bariatric surgery, managing a malpractice lawsuit, technology in the courtroom, preparing an opening statement in a jury trial, and effective cross-examination of expert witnesses. Mr. Burden received his undergraduate degree from Cornell University in 1989 and his law degree from Chicago Kent College of Law in 1992, where he served as an editor of the Law Review.



Hon. Bernice Donald received a B.A. from the University of Memphis and a J.D. from the University of Memphis School of Law. She also holds an L.L.M. degree from Duke University and an honorary doctorate of laws from Suffolk University School of Law. Judge Donald has worked both in private practice and as a public defender. In addition, Judge Donald was an adjunct professor at Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law. Judge Donald served as a United States circuit judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit from 2011 to 2023. She previously served as a United States district judge for the

United States District Court for the Western District of Tennessee from 1995 to 2011. After her retirement from the bench, Judge Bernice Bouie Donald joined the law firm of Burch, Porter and Johnson, PLLC. She has written a number of published articles in various journals. Judge Donald currently serves as the Gabelli Rule of Law Professor at the National Judicial College, and as a Neutral for Judicial Arbitration and Mediation Services (JAMS).



R. Jeffrey Lowe is a partner with Kightlinger & Gray, LLP, in New Albany, Indiana, and Louisville, Kentucky. He is the chair of the firm's Employment and Civil Rights practice group. He regularly defends governmental entities and their employees in cases involving constitutional and state law torts throughout Indiana and Kentucky. His practice focuses on the defense of governmental entities and their employees on issues ranging from constitutional torts to zoning matters to employment issues, as well as state law claims made against his governmental clients. Jeff is the current President of the Association of

Lawyers Defending Business ("DRI"). He is also a member of the Federation of Defense and Corporate Counsel, serves on the Kentucky Defense Counsel Board of Directors, and formerly served on the Defense Trial Counsel of Indiana Board of Directors. Jeff earned his B.A. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and his J.D. from the University of Louisville School of Law.



Jen Scullion is a partner at Seeger Weiss in New Jersey. For over twenty years, Jen has led complex litigations, arbitrations, and appeals for U.S. and multinational clients in a wide array of areas, including antitrust, consumer fraud, public nuisance, and product liability. Her experience includes multidistrict litigations, class actions, and federal regulatory proceedings. Passionate about ensuring that students from all backgrounds can attend college, she played an instrumental role in creating a fund to assist students experiencing financial emergencies. Jen received her B.A. from Boston University and her J.D. from the University of California at Los Angeles.



Prof. Fred O. Smith is a professor of law specializing in the federal judiciary, constitutional law, and posthumous legal interests. His work has appeared in prominent journals like the Yale Law Journal and Harvard Law Review. He has delivered lectures on related topics across the United States and internationally. He has also been interviewed as an expert by major media outlets, including CNN and the *New York Times*. Smith clerked for Judge Myron Thompson of the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Alabama; Judge Barrington D. Parker Jr. of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit; and Justice

Sonia Sotomayor of the U.S. Supreme Court. He received his B.A. from Harvard University and his J.D. from Stanford University.



Anthony Tarricone is a past president of the American Association for Justice, and managing partner of Kreindler & Kreindler LLP's Boston office, where he concentrates his practice in aviation accidents and disasters, products liability, civil rights, and other complex injury and death cases. He is the first American attorney elected to the Board of Directors of the Pan European Organisation of Personal Injury Lawyers (PEOPIL). Anthony currently serves on the PSC for litigation arising from the 2025 midair collision in Washington, D.C. between an Army helicopter and an American Eagle jet. He is also involved in a prominent international case arising from the death of an American as a result of a maritime accident on the Amalfi Coast of Italy. Anthony previously served on the PEC

for the Boeing 737 MAX Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 litigation, where he successfully settled numerous cases for European families during litigation against The Boeing Company.



Hon. Elizabeth M. Welch has been a Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court since January 1, 2021. She currently serves on the Michigan Judicial Council (the strategic planning body for Michigan's courts) and as the Justice liaison on technology issues. She also co-chairs the Commission on Fairness and Public Trust. Before joining the Supreme Court, Justice Welch practiced labor and employment law, worked as of counsel with a criminal defense practice, and counseled nonprofit organizations. Justice Welch previously served on her local school board and dedicated many years to advocacy for

public education. She has served on numerous nonprofit boards and currently serves as Vice President of the Steelcase Foundation. She received her law degree from Ohio State University and her undergraduate degree from Penn State University.



Prof. Robert Yablon is a Professor of Law at the University of Wisconsin and Faculty Co-Director of the State Democracy Research Initiative. His research interests include political and election law, constitutional law, and federal and state courts. He regularly publishes articles in leading law reviews and is the co-author of *Election Law in a Nutshell*. His students have twice honored him with the Classroom Teacher of the Year Award. Professor Yablon received his bachelor's degree in economics and political science from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and his master's degree in social policy from the University of Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He then earned his J.D. at Yale Law

School, where he was an Articles Editor of the Yale Law Journal. Following law school, Professor Yablon served as a law clerk for Judge William Fletcher of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit and for U.S. Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor. He also worked in private practice, arguing cases in several state and federal courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court.

Discussion Group Moderators



Spencer Hughes is Counsel at Gibbs Mura LLP, where he represents consumers against corporations in all stages of litigation. He is experienced in both trial-level and appellate litigation, frequently briefing and arguing novel questions of law across the country. Spencer is experienced in complex class actions involving automobile defects, financial misconduct by banks and cryptocurrency institutions, and other fraud and consumer protection actions. Spencer practiced at a plaintiffs' class action boutique and one of the largest litigation firms in the world prior to joining Gibbs Mura. He has represented a U.S. Senator in the Supreme Court and argued multiple times in federal appeals court. Before entering private practice, Spencer clerked for the Honorable Gerald Bard Tjoflat on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. He is a graduate of Duke University School of Law and Iowa State University.



Parker Hutchinson works in the New Orleans office of Gibbs Mura LLP representing plaintiffs in class actions and other complex litigation. He has extensive practice in mass torts, particularly in law and briefing roles in the federal multidistrict litigations *In re 3M Combat Arms Earplug Products Liability Litigation*; *In re Taxotere (Docetaxel) Products Liability Litigation*; and *In re Fosamax Products Liability Litigation*. In his federal appellate advocacy, he achieved an expansion of the definition of “adverse employment action” under Title VII in an issue of first impression. He has prevailed in several appeals on behalf of Plaintiffs in Louisiana courts. Parker is a 2009 graduate of Columbia Law School, where he focused on public law and was a leader at the Columbia Journal of European Law. During law school, he served as a judicial extern to the Honorable Stanwood Duval, Jr. of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana. Before law school, Parker worked as a congressional staffer, a musician, and a writer. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in Communication, cum laude, from Tulane University in 2004.



Hanne Jensen is an Associate at Gibbs Mura LLP where she represents plaintiffs in cutting-edge class actions and mass torts, primarily against technology companies who have wrongfully profited from consumers' personal information or have injured consumers through unsafe product design. She has successfully briefed complex issues of developing law, including the First Amendment and Section 230. Hanne is a graduate of Whitman College and the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law. Before joining Gibbs Mura, Hanne clerked for the Honorable Miranda M. Du of the District of Nevada in her beautiful hometown of Reno, Nevada.



Michelle Kranz is a founding partner of Zoll & Kranz, LLC in Toledo, OH and has been a plaintiff's lawyer for over 30 years. She devotes the majority of her time to complex consolidated litigation and class action including advocating for people injured by medical devices, prescription medications or corporate negligence. Over her career, she has been appointed to numerous MDL leadership teams and most recently was appointed to the Plaintiff's Executive Committee involving the East Palestine train derailment. Michelle is the incoming President of the National Civil Justice Institute and is Past President of the Ohio State Bar Association. She also remains an active member of the Toledo Bar Association and is a Sustaining Fellow of the Toledo Bar Foundation. Michelle served as the President of the Toledo Bar Association from 2015-2016. She is a member of the Toledo Bar Association, the Ohio State Bar Association,

the Ohio State Bar Foundation, the American Association for Justice and the Ohio Association for Justice. She is a 1993 graduate of the University of Toledo College of Law and a 1990 cum laude graduate of Miami University.



Caroline McMahon is an associate in the New York office of Robins Kaplan LLP. Her practice focuses on representing survivors of child sexual abuse in New York and New Jersey against institutions alleged to have enabled, concealed, or failed to prevent the abuse. Caroline also represents individuals harmed by corporate misconduct in complex litigation, including the multidistrict litigation involving recalled Exactech joint replacement devices. Outside of her regular practice, Caroline collaborates with Lawyers for Good Government through the Reproductive Health Legal Assistance Project, providing pro bono guidance to reproductive health care providers. Caroline is a 2022 graduate of Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, where she served as Senior Articles Editor of the Cardozo Law Review and worked at the New York State Attorney General's Office, Children's Defense Fund, and Bronx Legal Services



Robert S. Peck is the founder and president of the Center for Constitutional Litigation, P.C., an appellate law firm in Washington, D.C., and is widely recognized as one of the nation's leading appellate advocates. He has argued cases in courts across the country, including the U.S. Supreme Court, and is known for developing constitutional challenges involving access to the courts. Mr. Peck has taught constitutional law at George Washington University and American University law schools and serves on the advisory board of the Civil Justice Research Initiative at UC Berkeley School of Law. An accomplished author and lecturer, he has written or edited eight books and numerous scholarly articles on constitutional law, civil justice, and appellate advocacy.



Ellen Relkin is a shareholder at Weitz & Luxenberg whose practice focuses on pharmaceutical, medical device, and toxic tort litigation. For more than three decades, she has represented individuals injured by defective medical products and has been appointed by federal and state courts to leadership roles in numerous high-profile multidistrict and consolidated litigations, including cases involving JUUL Labs, Exactech, DePuy ASR hip implants, and Farxiga. A New Jersey Supreme Court-certified Civil Trial Attorney, Ms. Relkin is an elected member of the American Law Institute and serves on the Board of Advisors of the RAND Kenneth R. Feinberg Center for Catastrophic Risk Management and Compensation. She is a past president of the National Civil Justice Institute and a frequent national lecturer on mass tort and product liability litigation.



Alinor Sterling is an attorney at Koskoff Koskoff & Bieder PC in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where she represents individuals and families in complex civil litigation at both the trial and appellate levels. She represented families of the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in landmark litigation against Remington Arms and Alex Jones, helping secure historic decisions and judgments that advanced corporate accountability and addressed defamatory falsehoods. Her appellate work also includes significant victories involving the rights of children and medical malpractice victims. A former president of the Connecticut Trial Lawyers Association, Ms. Sterling currently co-chairs its Rules and Amicus Committees, serves on the executive board of Public Justice, and sits on the Legal Affairs and Amicus Committees of the American Association for Justice.



Corrie Yackulic has practiced law in Seattle, Washington since 1986, representing people and communities with injury claims against product manufacturers, polluters, rideshare companies, drivers and others. In addition to her practice in Seattle, she is of counsel to Sher Edling LLP, based in San Francisco, where she is part of the team representing public entities across the United States suing fossil fuel companies for damages due to climate change. Corrie is a Fellow of the American College of Trial Lawyers, and the National Civil Justice Institute. Raised in the Pacific Northwest, Corrie is a graduate of Harvard Law School.



Genevieve Zimmerman is a partner at the Minnesota law firm of Meshbesh & Spence. She serves as MDL Court appointed lead counsel for plaintiffs in several large MDLs dealing with dangerous orthopedic devices. Genevieve has tried high-profile products liability and medical malpractice cases in state court and has served as lead trial counsel for multiple MDL bellwether trials. She has also demonstrated a passion for pro bono service throughout her career, representing a range of clients from domestic violence victims to students seeking to vindicate their constitutional rights to obtaining a 2019 jury verdict in favor of a father whose son was murdered at Sandy Hook in defamation cases

against conspiracy theorists who published a book “Nobody Died at Sandy Hook” which denied his son ever existed. Genevieve is a member of the Local Rules Advisory Committee for the District of Minnesota and is the past President of the Minnesota Association for Justice. She is a past member of the Board of Governors for the American Association for Justice. Genevieve received her B.A. from Macalester College and her J.D. from Hamline University School of Law.