

Judge Raja Rajeswari makes history for breaking barriers and championing justice| Inside Out

By Carol Ann Benanti SI Advance March 29, 2026



From the left, Richmond County District Attorney Michael McMahon, who has a Citation for Judge Rajeswari, Public Administrator Edwina Frances Martin, who presented a Citation to Judge Rajeswari, Attorney, Grace Chamoun Taranto, chair of the RCBA's Diversity Committee, Criminal Court Judge Raja Rajeswari, attorney, Soukaina Sourouri, a member of RCBA Diversity Committee, and Vincent Albunio, president of the Richmond County Bar Association. (Courtesy/Valerie Aro)Staten Island Advance

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — During Women's History Month, we pause to celebrate the trailblazers who not only pave the way, but also lift others as they climb.

As we recognize the international movement and women's contributions globally, The Richmond County Bar Association celebrated a woman who truly did make history and whose unwavering dedication, resilience, and leadership has left an indelible mark on our community.

Congratulatory greetings are in order for New York State Criminal Court Judge/Acting New York State Supreme Court Justice Raja Rajeswari who was presented with the Trailblazer Award during ceremonial proceedings in the Grand Ballroom of LiGreci's Staaten in West Brighton.

Judge Rajeswari was recognized for a decade of outstanding leadership in the Richmond County Criminal Court, exemplary service to the bar, commitment to

continuing legal education and tireless advocacy for language access and fairness in the courts.



State officials including judges, attorneys and friends, gather for a group photo to congratulate Criminal Court Judge Raja Rajeswari on her receiving the Trailblazer Award during Women's History Month. (Courtesy/Valerie Aro)Staten Island Advance

The event was hosted by the Richmond County Bar Association's Diversity Committee: Housing Court Judge Tashanna B. Golden, Family Court Judge Karen B. Wolff, Public Administrator Edwina Frances Martin, attorney and chairperson, Grace Chamoun Taranto, attorney, George Adames, attorney, Soukaina Sourouri, and Edwina G. Richardson, deputy chief administrative judge for Justice Initiatives.



Attorney, Grace Chamoun Taranto, chair of the RCBA's Diversity Committee, addresses the crowd. (Courtesy/Valerie Aro)Staten Island Advance

A Little about Judge Rajeswari

Born in Chennai, Southern India, Judge Rajeswari immigrated to the United States at age 16.

After more than 16 years at the Richmond County District Attorney's Office, she made history as the first South Asian woman to become a Judge in New York State and the first Indian-American woman appointed to Criminal Court in New York's history.



Criminal Court Judge Raja Rajeswari accepts the Trailblazer Award. (Courtesy/Valerie Aro)Staten Island Advance

She was later promoted to Acting Justice of the Supreme Court.

Judge Rajeswari chairs both the NYC Criminal Court Equal Justice Committee and the NYS United Court System Advisory Committee on Language Access, working to ensure equitable access to justice for immigrants, non-English speakers, and the deaf and hard of hearing community.

She also is a faculty member of the Judicial Institute.



Civil Court Judge Austin D'Souza, Criminal Court Judge Raja Rajeswari and Criminal Court Judge Biju Koshy. (Courtesy/Valerie Aro)Staten Island Advance

Addressing the crowd were Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives, Edwina G. Richardson, Supervising Judge of Richmond County's Criminal Court, Biju Koshy on behalf of Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for the New York City Courts, Richmond County District Attorney Michael McMahon, RCBA President Vincent Albanio, RCBA Director Grace Chamoun Taranto and New York State Supreme Court Justice Mario Mattei.



Richmond County District Attorney Michael McMahon addresses the crowd. (Courtesy/Valerie Aro)Staten Island Advance

“Dedicating her career to justice and fairness under the law, Judge Raja Rajeswari’s lifetime of service and leadership inside the courtroom has made Staten Island a better place to call home,” said DA McMahon. “Beginning her career in the Richmond County District Attorney’s Office, she’s handled some of the most serious and sensitive cases in our criminal justice system before making history as the first South Asian woman to become a judge in New York and the first Indian American woman appointed to Criminal Court in our state’s history. Her journey from a 16-year-old immigrant arriving in this country, to a prosecutor serving our community, to a historic judicial appointment, and now to a leader working to ensure fairness and inclusion in our courts — truly reflects the best of our profession. I can think of no one more deserving of the RCBA’s Trailblazer Award than the Judge Raja Rajeswari.”

Judge Richardson was “delighted” to say, “Judge Rajeswari is a phenomenal woman has done so much to ensure equal justice for all throughout the State of New York.” She added that she couldn’t miss the event because she needed to be “among those who know how important you are, the trails you have blazed, the work that you do, the commitment to justice for all. It is my delight, my honor, my privilege to congratulate you along with your colleagues.”



Edwina G. Richardson, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives and Criminal Court Judge Raja Rajeswari. (Courtesy/Valerie Aro)Staten Island Advance

Judge Rajeswari spoke about her journey as a young immigrant with limited means, having grown up in a one room house as she navigated the challenges of having to borrow a winter coat and live with friends.

She credited her multi-lingual abilities and multi-cultural upbringing for a unique capacity to communicate with witnesses from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. She thanked distinguished guests who were in attendance including Judge Richardson and Appellate Division Judge Lillian Wan. She expressed her gratitude to RCBA president Vincent Albunio, and offered special thanks to the Diversity Committee and its chair and board member Grace Chamoun Taronto, who together with past president Timothy O'Donovan, Yan Katsnelson and board members, worked tirelessly to ensure the success of the event.

"When I saw the Statue of Liberty for the first time on the Staten Island Ferry, I shed copious tears as a 16-year-old immigrant because that symbol crystallized the opportunity to obtain an education that I had yearned for since I was a little girl," said Judge Rajeswari.

She shopped at the Salvation Army and slept on couches and floors and thanked the South Asian community who embraced her. And she spoke about attending the College of Staten Island on a scholarship.

“It doesn’t matter where you start from, what matters is what you do with the opportunities that you’ve been given and the positive impact you can make”.
Bring appointed Judge was way beyond her dreams and aspirations of a poor immigrant. She always felt it was her duty to give back to the country and community that gave her a lifeline when she needed it most.

She noted she’s been asked about the garbage dump and “Mob Wives” TV show, when people learn she’s from Staten Island.

When Judge Rajeswari thinks of Staten Island, she said trailblazers who’ve made a real impact come to mind.

“I think about the late, great DA William Murphy who told me on my first day as an ADA, “It is not about winning or losing cases, but it is about doing justice in every case.”

She thinks about DA Dan Donovan and the current DA Michael McMahon for their efforts to ensure justice in the court system.

And she noted she thinks about judges who were in attendance including Federal Court Judge Eric Vitaliano, retired Justice William Mastro, Justice Mario Mattei, Judge Biju Koshy and members of the defense bar and the District Attorney’s office who are “Ambassadors of Justice” on Staten Island — to which she received a standing ovation. She also referenced the importance of language access and diversity, and her steadfast commitment to justice to ensure equal justice in the court system.

More on Justice Rajaswari

A renowned classical dancer and instructor who’s performed across the globe to promote Indian art and culture, as a teen she represented the Government of India as a cultural delegate.

She received the Outstanding Artist Scholarship from the President of India and the Outstanding Young Artist Award from the country’s vice president.

In 1994 she graduated summa cum laude from the College of Staten Island with a bachelor of science degree and received a juris doctorate with honors from Brooklyn Law School in 1998.



Criminal Court Judge Raja Rajeswari and Richmond County District Attorney Michael McMahon. (Courtesy/Valerie Aro)Staten Island Advance

She began her career in public service in the District Attorney's office in 1998 where she served for more than 16 years in several bureaus.

She was promoted to the position of Deputy Bureau Chief of the Sex Crimes Special Victims Bureau and Senior Trial Counsel for the Supreme Court Bureau.



Judge Lillian Wan of the Appellate Division, Second Department...Judge Raju Rajeswari and her husband Michael Christie. (Courtesy/Valerie Aro)Staten Island Advance