Fund for Modern Courts
Adriene Holder Remarks
The Fern Schair Public Service Award
October 28, 2026

Thank you, Chief Judge Wilson, for that generous introduction. Thank you to the Fund for Modern Courts, to Chair Abbe Gluck and Executive Director Denise Kronstadt. And congratulations to my fellow honorees, Helen Cantwell and Evan Chesler. I'm humbled to share this evening with you.

Fern Schair started out keeping people in their homes, then representing children, then fixing the courts themselves. Housing. Children and families. Access. That's my work, too. This award is a passing of the torch and a to-do list.

That to-do list started the day I became Chief Attorney of the Civil Practice at The Legal Aid Society. I had spent my career hearing what to expect in the courts where our clients appear: Criminal Court, Family Court, Housing Court.

Do more with less. Process cases faster. Cut corners.

Real access to justice in those courtrooms? Impossible, they said. Not because anyone in those courtrooms doesn't care. Because the volume is crushing, and the resources were never there.

My colleagues helped me refuse that, and New York helped us prove it. With the City, IOLA, and Judicial Civil Legal Services, we are closer than ever to funding the full cost of quality work: the time, the OCA case standards, competitive salaries, and whole teams. The lawyer, the paralegal, the social worker, the investigator, the support staff.

Chief Judge, thank you for the Judiciary's leadership. That is revolutionary, because this was never just about funding. It was about whether we would accept less.

We know better.

And the Fund for Modern Courts builds on that. Through court simplification, citizen court monitoring, and Court reform, you make the courts where our clients appear easier to enter, to understand, and to trust.

We bring the lawyer. You help build the court that works. Courts are only as strong as the access they guarantee.

We've been at this a long time. The Legal Aid Society just turned 150. Old? Yes. Slow? Never. When a client's world is on fire, we don't wait for permission to run toward it. I tell my team: we make the impossible possible. Here's the proof.

Take children. In 1962, a Legal Aid lawyer named Charles Schinitsky saw what the old Children's Court lacked: a lawyer for the child. His work gave us the nation's first practice providing lawyers for children. Five years later, *In re Gault*, the Supreme Court said children facing the State need them.

We were already there.

And this January, the Second Circuit revived our challenge to rules that keep children in strangers' homes when loving relatives are ready to take them in.

Still there.

Take criminal defense. In 1990, people sat in custody for days before seeing a judge, one for ninety-five hours for selling umbrellas without a license. We lost in federal court, so we filed over 9,000 habeas petitions in state court. In 1991, the Court of Appeals gave New York the 24-hour clock.

In 2020, when it was ignored, we were back in court.

Still holding the clock.

And after more than a decade of litigation over brutality in the City's jails, a federal court appointed a remediation manager for Rikers Island.

Impossible, until it wasn't.

And take my own Practice, Civil. In 1979, we were told there was no right to shelter. We said: read Article XVII of the New York State Constitution. And the courts agreed: Callahan, then Boston for families.

When the City tried to gut that right in 2024, we defended it again.

This summer, we and the City Council settled the CityFHEPS case: $300 million across two City budgets to expand rental assistance subsidies, on a principle: when the City Council passes a law, the City must implement it.

Juvenile. Criminal. Civil. Three Practices, different courtrooms, one refusal to accept "impossible."

So how do you motivate a Legal Aid lawyer?

Tell them what our clients can't have: No lawyer, No shelter, No hearing, No dignity.

Then watch what happens. To borrow from a movie every lawyer here has seen, and yes, it's the villain's line: you want justice in these courts? You need us in these courts!

And when I say "us," I don't mean me. I mean the people I get to stand beside every day.

To our Attorney-in-Chief and CEO, Twyla Carter, and our senior leadership team: thank you.

To Tina Luongo and Dawne Mitchell, who lead our Criminal Defense and Juvenile Rights Practices, my "siblings" in this work: your brilliance and creativity inspire me everyday.

And to my Civil Practice Attorneys-in-Charge: none of this works without you.

And to every attorney, social worker, paralegal, investigator, and support staffer, and our pro bono partners: your fingerprints are on every part of our work. Thank you.

And to my family and friends, who love a lawyer: you're the only people on earth I've never been allowed to cross-examine. I've tried. You are my anchor.

And we are all going to need anchors, because we are practicing at a moment when lawyers are pressured for the clients they represent, judges are threatened for their rulings, due process is uneven in the courts that decide people's futures, and the people we serve are too often described as undeserving. That is why we need each other.

So what do we do? We show up.

Every day, in every courtroom in this state, a judge says, “Counsel, state your appearance.” And a lawyer stands and answers. That’s how every win I named tonight began: not in speeches, but in appearances.

Fern showed up for tenants, for children and families, for the courts themselves. So let's keep appearing: for our clients, for each other, for the rule of law.

The to-do list is long. Let's get to work.

Thank you.