

## Honoring the Late New York Chief Judge Judith Kaye in recognition of Jewish American Heritage Month



Judge Judith Kaye was an innovative and pioneering jurist who made major reforms to the New York court system during her 16 years as New York Chief Judge.

Judge Kaye, the first woman Chief Judge, held the position of Chief Judge longer than any of her predecessors. Nominated by former Governor Mario Cuomo, she was confirmed unanimously by the New York State Senate in 1993.

During her tenure as Chief Judge—where she not only heard and ruled on cases pending before the state’s highest court, but also oversaw the entire state judicial system, including 16,000 employees—she established innovative “problem-solving courts” for cases involving domestic violence, addiction and mental illness. She expanded the jury pool by removing automatic exemptions and streamlined adoption procedures, including the creation of the “Adoption Now” initiative that led to the finalization of over 5,000 adoptions and improved foster care. She ordered more open access to courts and helped found the Center for Court Innovation, an independent, non-profit think tank that serves as the court system’s research and development arm. On the bench, she stood against capital punishment and sought to expand civil rights, including gay marriage, under the New York State Constitution.

At various times, Judge Kaye served as: trustee and vice president of the Legal Aid Society; co-chair of the Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children; trustee and vice-chair of the Clients Security Fund (later the Lawyers Fund for Client Protection); member of the board of directors of the Institute of Judicial Administration; member of the board of editors of New York State Bar Journal; member of the board of directors of the Conference of Chief Justices;

member of the American Bar Association Commission on Domestic Violence; founding member and honorary chair of the Judges and Lawyers Breast Cancer Alert; member of the board of directors of the American Judicature Society; and trustee of Barnard College.

Judge Kaye received many awards, including the Distinguished Jurist Award and Gold Medal of the New York State Bar Association, the ABA Justice Center's John Marshall Award and the Barnard Medal of Distinction from Barnard College, the college's highest honor. She was a longtime member of Congregation Shearith Israel, a Sephardic synagogue in New York. Benjamin Cardozo, one of Judge Kaye's predecessors as Chief Judge, was a congregant at the same synagogue.

Judge Kaye was born Judith Ann Smith on August 4, 1938, in Monticello, New York. She was the child of Polish-Jewish immigrants who owned a small women's apparel store in the Catskills. Skipping two grades, she graduated from high school at age 15 before enrolling at Barnard College, obtaining her B.A. in Latin American Civilization in 1958. After working as a reporter for a local paper, she graduated cum laude from New York University School of Law in 1962, where she was one of only ten women in a class of nearly 300. She met her husband, Stephen Rackow Kaye, while in private practice. She was first appointed to the bench as an Associate Judge on the New York Court of Appeals in 1983 before becoming Chief Judge. She died on January 7, 2016, after a battle with lung cancer, at the age of 77.