



Armenian Bar Association

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PRESS RELEASE

The Greater New York Area Legal Community Celebrates Public Service and Commemorates the Armenian Genocide at the Armenian Bar Association's Public Servants Dinner

April 23, 2026, New York, NY — The Armenian Bar Association hosted its annual Public Servants Dinner at the historic Yale Club of New York City, honoring the courage, endeavors, and sacrifices of all public servants. This year's Public Servants Honorees were the prominent civil rights attorney, **Armen H. Merjian**, and the Administrative Judge of the New York State Unified Court System, **Hon. Joseph A. Zayas**. The event brought together the leadership of the New York Courts, administrative and supervising judges, appellate and trial court judges, members of the federal judiciary, distinguished public servants, leaders of bar associations, and prominent attorneys.

Hon. Frank (Hagopian) Caruso and Hon. Deborah H. Karalunas served as the masters of ceremony. Following the national anthems performed by Hasmik Mekanejian and Anahit Zakaryan, His Grace Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan, the Primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, led the opening prayer.

Hon. Deborah H. Karalunas set the stage by delivering [the opening statement](#), noting that the event is held on the eve of the Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day and that "[f]or the Armenian people, public service is more than a professional calling; it is a moral one, reflective of our belief that the world will prosper when we stand united to promote justice and compassion, and protect one another's dignity."

Robert H. Tembeckjian, the Administrator and Counsel to NYS Commission on Judicial Conduct, [delivered remarks](#) recalling his native Armenian dialect from Tigranakert, and remembering the survivors of the Genocide who rose "up from the ashes of mass prosecution to write poetry, compose operas, build enterprises, churches, and schools all over the world."

Souren A. Israelyan spoke on behalf of the organizing committee, acknowledging the prior honorees of the Public Servants Dinner and [the sponsors of the event](#), whose generosity made the event possible.

The remarks on behalf of the New York State Bar Association were delivered by its President Kathleen M. Sweet. She congratulated the honorees whose "work while challenging and undervalued, and more often than not thankless, is recognized here tonight."

Hasmik Mekanejian, a mezzo-soprano, and Anahit Zakaryan, a soprano, with the piano accompaniment of Diana Gabrielyan, treated the audience with a [stellar performance](#) of classical Armenian, Italian, and Broadway songs.

At the presentation of the Public Servant Awards, Hon. Claire Chadirjian Cecchi introduced Armen H. Merjian. Merjian is one the leading civil rights attorneys in the United States, and likely the most significant advocate for those who suffer from HIV/AIDS. In 2025, Amelia Hanibelsz, an award-winning filmmaker, produced a documentary short about Merjian titled [The Good Fight](#). The film has won 10 awards in international film festivals. With the filmmaker's permission, a segment of the film was shown

during the event. [During his remarks](#), Merjian shared that all four of his grandparents were orphans of the Armenian Genocide, and his Armenian heritage shaped who he is. «Ես փաստաբան եմ, որովհետև եմ» - “I am lawyer because I am an Armenian.” “To be an Armenian and conscious of your history is to be in a constant quest for justice for those who have nothing.”

Hon. Deborah H. Karalunas introduced Hon. Joseph A. Zayas. Judge Zayas is the Chief Administrative Judge of the State of New York, the highest-ranking administrative position within the New York State Judiciary, overseeing the day-to-day administration and operations of 3,300 state and local judges and 17,000 non-judicial employees in over 300 locations across the state. [During his remarks](#), Judge Zayas expressed that he “wanted to understand the reasons **why** Armenians place such a high value in public service.” His enquiry elucidated that Armenians are deeply connected with their heritage, and the history of their own suffering creates a “moral bridge” with the struggles of others. “The ‘moral bridge’ that is ‘uniquely Armenian’ is aligned with our country’s highest ideals and embodied in our constitutions, the rule of law, and judicial precedents. Armenians understand, as much as anyone, how quickly these ideals and principles can collapse into authoritarianism and tyranny if not vigorously guarded.” He underscored: “I can only hope that our democracy and the rule of law are as resilient as your great heritage.”

Hon. Jenny Rivera, an Associate Judge of the New York Court of Appeals, delivered [the closing statement](#). Judge Rivera shared that because of her Puerto Rican heritage and her family’s experiences, “I really do appreciate the Armenian concerns of maintaining identity, preserving culture and language; your commitment to justice, to human rights, to the rule of law, and of course, to the norms of international law speaks very deeply to me.”

The event was closed by a benediction delivered by His Eminence Anoushavan Tanielian, the Prelate of the Armenian Prelacy.

On the following day, April 24, 2026, both NYS Governor Kathy Hochul and NYC Mayor Zohran Mamdani [commemorated the Armenian Genocide](#). Governor Hochul [proclaimed](#) April 24, 2026, as the Armenian Remembrance Day.

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