

# History in the Making

by Emma Hynek

## A Historic Recognition

This year's Founders' Awards mark the first time the Florida Justice Association\* (FJA) has given the recognition to an all-female slate of recipients. This year's candidates were submitted by the FJA Women's Caucus, and the final recipients were voted on by the FJA Board at the annual meeting at Convention in June. The all-female roster of award recipients has received an overwhelmingly positive reaction from the legal community.

"The Women's Caucus is a beacon of light within the FJA," said FJA member Nick Johnson, who is of counsel at Cohen Milstein. "The practice of plaintiff personal injury has been dominated by men for decades, and the Women's Caucus has succeeded in creating a growing group of female practitioners, who serve as an inspiration to not only other women within the organization, but to anyone who can appreciate the tremendous value of increasing diversity within the FJA, and how this diversity inures to the benefits of our clients, and society as a whole."

Molli McGuire, chair of the FJA Women's Caucus, believes this year's slate of recipients represents decades of membership and leadership in the FJA that is now appropriately being recognized. "Each and every one of the award winners are absolutely fearless leaders. They serve as an example that vigorous advocacy can and must be combined with unwavering professionalism. They are constant providers of support and guidance to young women in our organization interested in leadership," McGuire said. She anticipates more female members receiving these awards in the future.

"It is only fitting that the recipients of the awards this year were nominated by the Women's Caucus and were resoundingly approved by the FJA Board of Directors," Johnson added.

## Perry Nichols Award



The Perry Nichols Award is the highest honor given by the Florida Justice Association. It is awarded to a nominee who has demonstrated exceptional dedication to improving the justice system over the course of their career. This year's recipient of the Perry Nichols Award is *Justice Peggy A. Quince*.

With her uniquely remarkable and distinguished career, Justice Quince stands out as a leader in the legal profession. She started her career opening her own law office in 1978 and practicing general civil law until she became an assistant attorney general in 1980. This was followed by a position on the Second District Court of Appeal. In 1998, she was appointed to the Florida Supreme Court, where she served for 20 years and served as the chief justice from 2008 to 2010. Justice Quince was the first African American female chief justice on the Florida Supreme Court.

"Justice Peggy Ann Quince stands as one of the greatest and most important figures in Florida's history. She has an extensive career as a champion for justice. Undoubtedly, she is a living example for all, and has accomplished innumerable firsts," said Judge June McKinney.

Over the years, Justice Quince has provided counsel in the most complicated of legal situations, including death penalty cases, attacks on voter's rights, Florida's Combating Public Disorder Bill in 2021, and, famously, the 2000 election dispute between President George Bush and Vice President Al Gore.

Although she is now retired from the bench, Justice Quince has not stopped her work within Florida's civil justice system. She currently works on the Thirteenth Judicial Circuit in Hillsborough County, reviewing sentences for selective cases to prevent the unjust sentencing of an innocent person.

Justice Quince was on the Board of Directors of the League of Women Voters of Florida for six months and has been described as a mentor for many young women lawyers and a role model to every person who deals with her on a level of activism. “She is personable, passionate, knowledgeable, open, willing to learn, she’s an activist. She’s a true example of a patriot and a citizen of the United States,” said former League President Patricia Brigham. “Her commitment to the Constitution, democracy and justice, is obviously powerful.”

“Justice Quince is a wonderful person. She’s been a dedicated public servant, she’s smart, she’s made some historic decisions,” said Carolyn Stewart. I think that it’s a well-deserved honor for someone who’s retired from the bench.”

### Al J. Cone Lifetime Achievement Award



The Al J. Cone Lifetime Achievement Award is given to a person who demonstrates: “A career of leadership; A career of example setting; A career of devotion; A career of courage.” **Julie Braman Kane** of Colson Hicks Eidson is the recipient of this year’s award.

Kane is a personal injury lawyer at Colson Hicks Eidson and has been a partner at the firm for 22 years. She is the lead and liaison counsel in the In Re: Monat Hair Products Multidistrict Litigation, on the Executive Committee for Allergan Biocel MDL and on the Plaintiffs’ Steering Committee for the In Re: 21st Century Oncology Customer Data Security Breach Litigation.

Kane has been a member of the American Association of Justice for more than two decades and has served as the organization’s president. She founded and was the chair of the Voter Protection Action Committee, which works to protect voter rights, and was trustee and co-chair of the National College of Advocates. Kane has been on the Board of Directors at FJA, commissioner of the Florida Elections Commission and president of the Miami-Dade Chapter of the Florida Association for Women Lawyers. Kane is also the former chair of the FJA Women’s Caucus.

She has been recognized with a variety of awards and honors, including the American Bar Association’s Pursuit of Justice Award in 2017. Kane has given multiple legal presentations and has had her writing published several times.

“Julie is a true leader, and she’s a leader in the sense if she asked me to walk off a ledge, I’d be right behind her. She’s not going to ask anyone to do anything she’s not willing to do herself 10 times over and I think that’s really a sign of a leader,” said Brenda Fulmer, shareholder at Searcy Denney. “It’s not ego, it’s not having an entourage, it’s basically getting in there and doing what needs to be done to solve a problem or to achieve a goal, and that’s Julie.”

### B.J. and Tom Masterson Award for Professionalism



The criteria for the B.J. and Tom Masterson Award for Professionalism include excellence in advocacy, a distinguished and ethical career, and contributions that have advanced the cause of professionalism in the practice of law. This year’s recipient, **Leslie Mitchell Kroeger** of the Cohen

Milstein law firm, has gone above and beyond in demonstrating why she is deserving of the award.

Kroeger’s career began as an assistant public defender for the Eighteenth Judicial Circuit of Florida. She served as an assistant state attorney in Miami-Dade County before moving into private practice and is now a partner at Cohen Milstein and becoming co-chair of the firm’s Complex Tort Litigation practice group. Her practice areas include catastrophic injury and wrongful death, complex tort litigation, environmental toxic torts, managed care abuse litigation, PFAS litigation and unsafe and defective products.

As a trial lawyer, Kroeger has worked to promote FJA priority legislation, including legislation on improved tire safety and a 2014 bill that became law which increased booster seat requirements for children in Florida. In October of 2015, Kroeger was honored with the FJA’s Champion of Consumer Safety award for her work with the 2014 legislation.

“As Leslie has devoted years of work to the Florida Justice Association, she has been an advocate for safety for all Floridians. Her work with providing car seats for infants and children is a perfect example of that,” said Laurie Briggs, a personal injury lawyer at Searcy Denney.

From 2019 through 2020, Kroeger served as only the second female president of the FJA. Her work as FJA president is one of the many reasons she appeared on this year’s slate of Founders Awards’ recipients.

“The truest test of professionalism is the ability to demonstrate grace under fire. As president of FJA, Leslie faced unprecedented challenges, but she never wavered in her commitment to do what is best for the global good,” said Natasha Diemer, chief strategy officer of Dominick Cunningham & Whalen. “She is a woman who has always led with courage and conviction and the superhuman power to face opponents head on with grace, grit, and a warm Southern smile.”

Kroeger has been praised by her colleagues as a dedicated attorney defined by her poise and professionalism, and an inspiration to all aspiring leaders in the law profession.

“The B.J. and Tom Masterson Award recognizes an individual who, in his or her lifetime of practicing law, epitomizes ethical

professionalism and who is a model to which all lawyers should aspire. Leslie fits this description to a ‘T,’” said Johnson. “In my over 14-year career, Leslie stands out as one of the most passionate, diligent, and ethical lawyers I have ever encountered.”

**Jon E. Krupnick Award**

The Jon E. Krupnick Award recognizes and honors a trial lawyer champion whose efforts on behalf of a particular client reflect relentless commitment, perseverance and fortitude to seek justice and achieve success through all obstacles and legal roadblocks that were encountered. This year, FJA is honoring two judges with this recognition — Judge Jennifer Bailey and Judge Bertila Soto.



**Judge Jennifer Bailey**

Judge Bailey attended the University of Georgia School of Law and, in 2018, got her L.L.M. in judicial studies from the Duke University School of Law. She has been a circuit court trial judge in Miami-Dade, Florida, for 27 years and is currently the administrative judge for the 25-judge Circuit Civil Division.

“I can honestly say there is no judge in Miami who is more committed to the legal profession, and to our court system, than Jennifer Bailey,” said Judge Kevin Emas. “I think Judge Bailey’s commitment can best be exemplified by her eager willingness to take on projects and tasks that others will not. She volunteers for the dull and dreary with the same enthusiasm as the contentious and controversial, and all with the same problem-solving goal in mind — making sure we deliver access to civil justice.”

Throughout her career, Judge Bailey has chaired and served on the boards of various legal organizations, which currently include the Board of Governors of Directors of the National Center for State

Courts, the Board of Advisors for the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System, and the NCSC Institute for Court Management. She previously served as dean of the Florida College of Advanced Judicial Studies, as chair of the Florida Bar Civil Procedure Rules Committee and as vice-chair of the Florida Court Education Council for four consecutive terms, appointed by four different chief justices of the Florida Supreme Court. She served on the Civil Justice Initiative Committee and chaired their Court Operations subcommittee.

She has won several legal awards and has taught or presented for several organizations and schools, including the Florida Judicial College at the College of Advanced Judicial Studies, Florida Circuit Court Conferences, and the University of Miami Law School.

“If excellence in what she does is the criteria [for this award], she deserves it. Judge Bailey is distinguished as a judge, has a tremendous work ethic, understands the law, applies it impartially, and treats everyone well,” said Rodolfo Sorondo, a former Third District Court of Appeal judge and now a partner at Holland & Knight. “She is 100 percent invested in what she does.”



**Judge Bertila Soto**

Judge Bertila Soto obtained her J.D. degree from the University of Miami, where she was a member of several legal organizations while a law clerk at her father’s firm, Osvaldo N. Soto and Associates.

Following law school, she transitioned from an intern to an assistant state attorney in the Dade County State Attorney’s Office. She became an associate at Osvaldo N. Soto and Associates in 1992. She then served on the Miami-Dade County Court from 1997 until 2002, when she was appointed by Gov. Jeb Bush to the circuit court.

During her time on the circuit court, she worked in the family and criminal divisions. Judge Soto was elected as the chief judicial officer of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida in 2013, the first female, the first Hispanic and the first Cuban American to hold the position.

“Chief Judge Soto served with great honor as chief judge for the maximum of four full terms, over eight years. The job of chief, while prestigious, is filled with tasks and duties that most judges would never want to do and could never do well. Judge Soto was our face and our voice in the courts, in the community, and in Tallahassee. Simultaneously, she had to manage the major and minor day to day issues that arise among 123 independently elected constitutional officers and the 11 buildings we work in and the many people and agencies with whom we interact,” said current Chief Judge Nushin Sayfie.

“This was a herculean task that I have witnessed Berti master firsthand through the incredible challenges of successfully advocating for a new Civil/Probate Courthouse and navigating an unprecedented global pandemic,” Sayfie added.



In addition to her duties in court, Judge Soto actively passes her legal knowledge on to the community. She is an adjunct professor in Miami Law's Litigation Skills Program and mentors students from her alma mater, Our Lady of Lourdes Academy, an all-girls high school in Miami. Many of the girls she mentors are now lawyers, and Judge Soto's daughter, Assistant United States Attorney Bertila Fernandez, says her mother's involvement in these girls' professional lives has allowed her to shape a younger generation of female leaders.

Fernandez cites her mother's dedication and hard work as the reasons she won the award. "Her commitment to this community is why she deserves this award. Her clients are the people of Miami-Dade County, and she wakes up every morning prepared to serve them better than her best, especially as chief. There isn't a problem she can't handle and there isn't anyone she isn't willing to work with. She is always willing to fight for the people she serves no matter the cost because she knows it is the right thing to do. She loves her job because of the people she is able to serve, not because of the title," Fernandez said.

### S. Victor Tipton Award



The S. Victor Tipton Award is given for superior achievement in legal writing and was awarded this year to *Maegen Peek Luka* of Newsome Melton Law Firm.

Luka has extensive experience in the legal field. She attended University of Florida College of Law, where she was symposium editor for the *Florida Law Review* and the recipient of several book awards. Following law school, Luka clerked for the Honorable Emmett R. Cox on the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals before joining a private practice as a litigator.

"Maegen is one of the smartest people I know. It's the reason we asked her to come work with us — we knew how gifted she was when it comes to complex legal issues. She is incredibly bright, incredibly gifted, and analyzes things on a different level than most people," said attorney Frank Melton. "She is committed to clients and committed to each case."

In 2019, Luka received the Defender of the Realm award from the Tampa Bay Trial Lawyers Association. She is a member of multiple professional associations and has been published several times. Luka's writing has been described by colleagues as unique, detailed, and a testament to her hard work. She has also been commended for her ability to notice an argument others may have missed. These talents have propelled her legal career and helped drive the Newsome firm's success on behalf of their clients.

"Maegen can express a dry and complicated point in a way that is both interesting and easily understood and compelling, and she understands her audience. A good brief is one that meets the needs of the judge who will decide the case. It is not about the emotional needs of the client or the behavior of the opposing party. Maegen



understands this well and that is why she has been so successful in persuading appellate judges to rule in favor of her clients," said former colleague Phil Padovano.

"She has prevailed for her clients in a wide variety of cases from a complex Medicaid reimbursement case in the Florida Supreme Court to numerous tobacco cases in the district courts of appeal," Padovano added.

Luka's law partner Rich Newsome also noted Luka's commitment to excellence in writing and representing clients, including her pro bono work. "Maegen has gone above and beyond by working as a volunteer, writing amicus briefs to the Florida Supreme Court for major issues that affect access to the court and the civil justice system and then garnering support by making phone calls to retired judges and reputable members of the bar to sign-onto her amicus briefs," Newsome said.

"She has also tirelessly worked as a volunteer to write and present white papers to educate the plaintiff's bar about new cases and developments in the law that will affect their practices. She continues to write in her own practice and for her own clients as a trial lawyer, handling complex and important litigation representing women in human trafficking cases, and other clients with catastrophic injuries," he added.

Luka is chair of the FJA's Appellate Practice Section. ■



### EMMA HYNEK

graduated from the University of South Carolina with a degree in mass communications. She is the marketing manager at North Media Co., where she works on client communications and projects, manages North's brand strategy, and handles digital marketing. Hynek has a passion for writing, media relations, and advocacy and channels these passions into her work at North.