



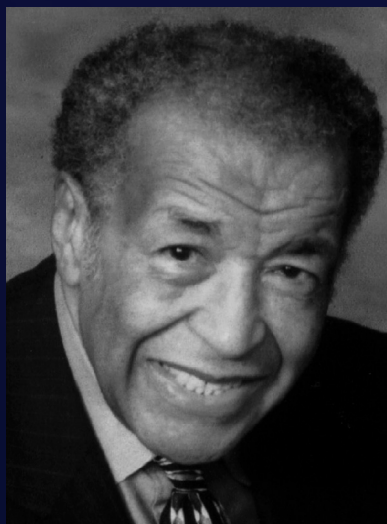
LAWYERS' COMMITTEE FOR
CIVIL RIGHTS
U N D E R L A W

2025 HIGGINBOTHAM LEADERSHIP AWARDS

GALA

10.16.2025

ROOTED IN JUSTICE, RISING IN SOLIDARITY



HIGGINBOTHAM LEADERSHIP AWARDS GALA

The Lawyers' Committee hosts the Higginbotham Leadership Awards Gala annually to highlight the exemplary contributions of corporate executives, policy makers, professional athletes, authors, artists and other individuals who champion the cause of justice and equity for all. The gala is one of the largest events in the civil rights community. We invite you to partner with us as we foster a culture of democracy that amplifies voice, opportunity and power of Black people and other communities of color.

The Lawyers' Committee's Higginbotham Leadership Awards Gala is named in honor of Judge A Leon Higginbotham, Jr. a pioneering civil rights advocate, professor, author and federal appeals court judge. The honorable Judge Higginbotham served as a special deputy state attorney general, a special hearing officer for the conscientious objections for the United States Department of Justice and a commissioner on the Pennsylvania Human Rights Commission. He was appointed a commissioner on the Federal Trade Commission by President Kennedy, the first African American so appointed to a federal regulatory commission.

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PROGRAM

Welcome

Melissa Murray

Symone Sanders Townsend

Greetings & Acknowledgements

Michael Swartz

Greetings & Opening Remarks

Damon Hewitt

Catalyst Award

Yolanda Renee King

Courageous Client Award

Chicago Women in Trades

Dinner

Musical Selection

Leon Timbo

Executive Remarks

Damon Hewitt

President's Award for Civil Rights

Kristen Clarke

Racial Justice Trailblazer Award

Laurence Fishburne

Higginbotham Leadership Award

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Closing Remarks

MENU

APPETIZER

Baby tri-color beets with asparagus
and crumbled goat cheese

MAIN COURSE

Prime roast ribeye with olive oil and sea salt,
potato Anna and brussels sprouts

DESSERT

Zabaglione cake with fresh strawberries

HONORING



LAURENCE FISHBURNE

Emmy and Tony Award-winning
Actor, Producer & Director



KRISTEN CLARKE

Former Assistant Attorney
General for Civil Rights,
U.S. Department of Justice



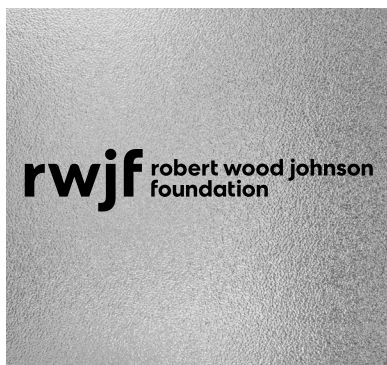
CHICAGO WOMEN IN TRADES



YOLANDA RENEE KING

Youth Activist & Author

HIGGINBOTHAM LEADERSHIP AWARD ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION



RWJF is a leading national philanthropy dedicated to taking bold leaps to transform health in our lifetime. To get there, we must work to dismantle structural racism and other barriers to health. Through funding, convening, advocacy, and evidence-building, we work side-by-side with communities, practitioners, and institutions to achieve health equity faster and pave the way, together, to a future where health is no longer a privilege, but a right.

OUR WORK: WHAT WE DO

We advance transformative systems change by identifying and confronting structural barriers to health and wellbeing. We harness a multi-pronged strategy to get to health equity—faster and together.

Funding

We fund diverse leaders who draw upon both innovative and time-tested strategies to create lasting change.

Convening

We create space for health practitioners, community leaders, and researchers to come together and have meaningful conversations on their own terms.

Evidence

We support new bodies of evidence that deepen and shift our understanding of health and wellbeing.

Advocacy

We promote policies and practices that challenge our institutions to be more equitable and effective for all of us.

www.rwif.org

RICHARD BESSER, MD.

President and CEO,
Robert Wood Johnson
Foundation



Richard Besser, MD, is the President and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), since April 2017. Previously, he had a distinguished career at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and ABC News.

RWJF is a leading national philanthropy dedicated to taking bold leaps to transform health in our lifetime. Partnering with communities, practitioners, and institutions to advance health equity through funding, advocacy, and evidence-building we envision a future where health is no longer a privilege, but a right.

Dr. Besser, an advocate for healthy communities and economic inclusion, emphasizes the importance of accountable public health systems and racial justice. He played a significant role in prioritizing health equity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Besser, a National Academy of Medicine member, serves on multiple boards, including Howard University's Board of Trustees and the Independent Sector's Board of Directors. He holds a Bachelor of Arts from Williams College, a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania, and completed his residency at Johns Hopkins University Hospital. Recognized with the Surgeon General's Medallion for his public health contributions, he volunteered as a pediatrician for over 30 years in community clinics across the country. He and his wife, Jeanne, have two adult sons.

REV. DR. STARSKY WILSON

Chair of the Board of Trustees,
Robert Wood Johnson
Foundation



Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson is President & CEO of Children's Defense Fund, the nation's leading child advocacy organization, and CDF Action. Dr. Wilson's public ministry engages philanthropy, faith, and community to achieve child well-being and racial justice. He currently chairs the board of trustees for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and board of visitors for Duke Divinity School.

Children's Defense Fund builds community so young people grow up with dignity, hope, and joy. It pursues its mission through policy advocacy, community organizing, and a network of CDF Freedom Schools in 100 U.S. cities across 30 states. Since joining CDF in 2020, Wilson has sharpened its strategy and deepened its focus on leadership development and youth voice, including reactivating CDF Action for grassroots legislative advocacy and merging the American Youth Policy Forum into CDF.

Prior to CDF, Rev. Wilson was president & CEO of Deaconess Foundation, co-chair of the Ferguson Commission, and pastor of Saint John's Church (The Beloved Community) in St. Louis. In these roles, he built the Deaconess Center for Child Well-Being, guided the region through the Ferguson uprising, and hosted the #BlackLivesMatter Freedom Rides.

Dr. Wilson earned a Bachelor's degree in political science from Xavier University of Louisiana, Master of Divinity from Eden Theological Seminary, and Doctor of Ministry from Duke University. His leadership has been lauded with three honorary doctorates, the Saint Louis Award, the ABFE James Joseph Lecture, NNPA National Leadership Award and induction into the MLK College of Preachers.

RACIAL JUSTICE TRAILBLAZER AWARD **LAURENCE FISHBURNE**

Emmy and Tony Award-winning
Actor, Producer & Director



Laurence J. Fishburne III has achieved an impressive body of work as an actor, producer and director. He starred in his first television show at age ten in the drama *One Life to Live*, and made his feature film debut at age twelve in *Cornbread, Earl and Me*. At fifteen, Laurence appeared in *Apocalypse Now*, the first of many cult classics destined to define his long career.

Fishburne's versatile acting has won him awards in theatre, film and television. In 1992, Fishburne won a Tony Award for his portrayal of Sterling Johnson in August Wilson's *Two Trains Running*. He won his first Emmy Award in 1993 for "The Box" episode of *Tribeca*, and his second for his one-man show, *Thurgood*, in 1997. In 1993, Laurence also received a Best Actor Oscar nomination for the Tina Turner biopic, *What's Love Got to Do with It*. He was an Emmy Award nominee and an NAACP Image Award winner for his starring role in the 1997 telefilm *Miss Evers' Boys*, which he also executive-produced. Laurence has been nominated 25 times for NAACP Image awards, with seven wins — most recently in 2021 for "Outstanding Performance in a Short Form Series" for *#FreeRayshawn*. His most recent Emmy win was also for his role in Quibi's *#FreeRayshawn*.

Laurence may be best known for his role as Morpheus in the Wachowski siblings' blockbuster *The Matrix* trilogy, but his many film credits include: Academy Award nominee John Singleton's *Boyz 'n the Hood*, Richard T. Heffron's telefilm *A Rumor of War*, Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple*, Steven Zaillian's *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, Mr. Singleton's *Higher Learning*, Clint Eastwood's *Mystic River* and cult classics, *Deep Cover* and *King of New York*.

In 2000, Fishburne founded Cinema Gypsy Productions with his longtime manager and producing partner, Helen Sugland. They have produced numerous nominated and award-winning projects including: *Thurgood*

(HBO), *Five Fingers* (Lionsgate), *Akeelah and the Bee* (Lionsgate), *Once in the Life* (Lionsgate), *Always Out Numbered* (HBO), *Hoodlum* (United Artists), *Miss Evers Boys* (HBO), *Madiba* (BET) and *Snowy Day* (Amazon Studios), which won the Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Pre-School Children's Animated Program in 2017. They produced the ABC-TV hit series *black-ish*, where Mr. Fishburne starred alongside Anthony Anderson and Tracee Ellis Ross, as well as its Freeform spinoff, "Grown-ish" and ABC spinoff, "Mixed-ish." In 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2021, *black-ish* received Emmy nominations for Outstanding Comedy Series. The show was also nominated in 2017 and 2018 for a Golden Globe Award for Best Television Series – Musical or Comedy. Their award-winning documentary "The Cave of Adullam" aired on ESPN in October 2022 and can be streamed currently on ESPN+. The Cave won a RealScreen Award, while also taking home three wins at the Tribeca Film Festival (Best Documentary Feature, Best Editing in a Documentary Feature and the Audience Award). Fishburne and Sugland's latest animated series Marvel's "Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur" premiered Feb 2023 on Disney Channel and can now be streamed on Disney Plus. New episodes of the series began airing in early 2025; the show received five Children's & Family Emmys wins. Fishburne also voice acted in the animated feature *Sneaks*. Next up is the new animated Disney series "Cookies & Milk," which was inspired by the childhood of Shawn Amos, founder of the Famous Amos chocolate chip cookie brand.

From 2021-22, Fishburne starred in *American Buffalo* on Broadway. His most recent mark in the fine arts was his one man show, "Like They Do in the Movies," which ran from March 10-31, 2024, at PAC NYC. Fishburne was both the star and the playwright of this one-man tour-de-force which he describes as "the stories and lies people have told me. And that I have told myself."

Recent films include: *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*, *Passengers*, *Last Flag Flying*, *Ant Man and The Wasp*, *John Wick 3*, *Running with the Devil* and *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*. In 2023, he starred in Netflix's *The School for Good & Evil* alongside Charlize Theron and Kerry Washington. Laurence then resumed his role in *John Wick: Chapter 4* and took the lead as Doc Rivers in FX's limited series, *Clipped*. In 2024, Fishburne paired up with Casey Affleck in the sci-fi thriller, *Slingshot*, and starred in Francis Ford Coppola's *Megalopolis*. This year he starred with Kate Mara in *The Astronaut* and Rami Malik in *The Amateur*. He will make his first appearance in season 4 of the Netflix hit series "The Witcher," releasing Oct. 30, 2025.

PRESIDENT'S AWARD FOR CIVIL RIGHTS LEADERSHIP **KRISTEN CLARKE**

Former Assistant Attorney
General for Civil Rights,
U.S. Department of Justice



Kristen Clarke served as the 19th Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Justice between 2021 and 2025. In this role, she directed and supervised enforcement of federal civil rights laws across the country. Under her leadership, the Division established new enforcement records for prosecutions of hate crimes, and law enforcement misconduct cases, and achieved groundbreaking results in areas including redlining, disability rights, education, fair housing, voting rights and more.

Clarke's tenure brought renewed focus on victims and survivors of violence. She supervised successful prosecutions of defendants tied to the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tyre Nichols and many others. She was also the force behind a massive and unprecedented review of the Tulsa Race Massacre, the federal government's first thorough reckoning of this national tragedy.

Clarke also served as the President and Executive Director of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law and has held leadership roles at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the New York State Attorney General's Office. Clarke is a frequent public speaker who has helped to shape the national dialogue around issues of civil and constitutional rights, and race and democracy.

A mother, native New Yorker, and daughter of Jamaican immigrants, Clarke has dedicated her professional life to fighting for the disadvantaged and disenfranchised.

COURAGEOUS CLIENT AWARD

CHICAGO WOMEN IN TRADES



Established in 1981, **Chicago Women in Trades** (CWIT) has been the leading advocate for women seeking to enter and thrive in nontraditional occupations, leading the charge for equal opportunity and advancement in industries historically dominated by men.

The true spirit of CWIT lies in the determination and resilience of the founding tradeswomen who refused to accept the status quo. From challenging discriminatory hiring and practices and advocating for safe workplaces, the unwavering commitment of CWIT's tradeswomen has opened doors and changed lives.

CWIT continues to dismantle barriers and build bridges through its comprehensive training programs, strategic policy initiatives, and vital industry support. CWIT's diverse coalition of tradeswomen, industry allies, and advocates is committed to reshaping the landscape of skilled labor.

CWIT's mission will not be fulfilled until gender is not a barrier to success in any occupation, where worksites reflect the full diversity of our communities, and where tradeswomen are given the same access to opportunities as their male counterparts.

COURAGEOUS CLIENT AWARD CHICAGO WOMEN IN TRADES

accepted by Jayne Vellinga,
Executive Director



Jayne Vellinga has been a leader in workforce development for more than thirty years, assuming the role of Executive Director for Chicago Women in Trades in 2009 after ten years of service as the organization's Director of Programs. To advance women's participation in construction and other nontraditional occupations, Jayne has overseen a large-scale expansion of program services, the development of a comprehensive technical assistance program, the acquisition of a workshop facility, and the establishment of pre-apprenticeship and welding training programs.

In addition to authoring downloadable career education guides, curriculum, and toolkits, Jayne has provided technical assistance to unions, industry leaders, community organizations, educational institutions, and workforce agencies. She has presented at numerous national and local conferences and meetings.

Before joining the Chicago Women in Trades, Jayne spent 13 years developing and delivering job training and placement services to Southeast Asian refugees.

CATALYST AWARD

YOLANDA RENEE KING

Youth Activist and Author



Born on May 25, 2008, in Atlanta, Georgia to Martin Luther King III and Arndrea Waters King. **Yolanda Renee King** is the sole grandchild of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King. She was named in honor of her aunt, Yolanda Denise King.

As a young activist, Yolanda has earned the respect and admiration of her generation for her outspoken support of the ongoing work to fulfill the great dream her grandfather shared with America. At just 16-years-old, Yolanda inspires her peers to follow in the legacy of her grandparents, following her parents in their work to realize the dream.

She has passionately addressed mass gatherings in protests against gun violence, homelessness and inhumane treatment of refugees seeking asylum on the U.S. southern border. When she met with President Obama in the Oval office, Yolanda Renee asked him, “Mr. President, what are you going to do about all of these guns?”

To empower young people to use their voice for good, Yolanda has made a splash on the national scene. In 2018, Yolanda spoke at the March for our Lives Rally in Washington, D.C. at just 9 years old, telling the crowd of thousands “I have a dream that enough is enough.” In June 2022, following the tragic mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas, Yolanda published a column in The Washington Post calling on her generation to stand up against gun violence.

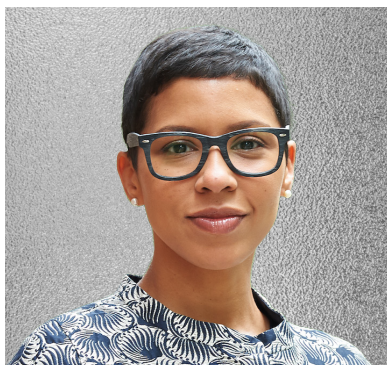
She has appeared on CNN, MSNBC, NBC News, ABC News, and other national media outlets to help carry on the mission her grandfather gave his life for so many years ago.

Recently, Yolanda authored her first book, *We Dream A World*, a children’s book that she says is for kids “big and little.” It talks about the legacy of her grandparents, and the choice we all have to follow the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King.

SPECIAL GUEST EMCEE

MELISSA MURRAY

Professor, NYU School
of Law & Co-host,
Strict Scrutiny Podcast



Melissa Murray is the Frederick I. and Grace Stokes Professor of Law at NYU School of Law, where she teaches constitutional law, family law, criminal law, and reproductive rights and justice. Her writing has appeared in a range of legal and lay publications, including the *Harvard Law Review*, the *Yale Law Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *The Nation*. Prior to joining the NYU Law faculty, Murray was the Alexander F. and May T. Morrison Professor of Law at the University of California, Berkeley, where she received the law school's Rutter Award for Teaching Distinction, the Association of American Law School's Derrick A. Bell Award, and, from March 2016 to June 2017, served as interim dean of the law school. Murray serves as legal analyst for MSNBC and is a co-host of *Strict Scrutiny*, a Crooked Media podcast about the Supreme Court. A graduate of the University of Virginia and Yale Law School, Murray clerked for Sonia Sotomayor, then a judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, and Stefan Underhill of the U.S. District Court for the District of Connecticut. She is a member of the American Law Institute and the New York bar.

SPECIAL GUEST EMCEE

SYMONE SANDERS TOWNSEND

Co-Host, MSNBC's
The Weeknight



Symone Sanders Townsend is a powerhouse political strategist, author, and media personality known for breaking barriers and shaping national conversations. At 25, she became the youngest presidential press secretary in history while working on Senator Bernie Sanders's 2016 campaign. By 29, she had published her first book, *No, You Shut Up: Speaking Truth to Power and Reclaiming America*, and served as a senior advisor on President Joe Biden's 2020 campaign.

She later made history again as Deputy Assistant to President Biden and Senior Advisor and Chief Spokesperson for Vice President Kamala Harris, becoming the first Black woman to hold the role.

Symone has been a fierce advocate for juvenile justice reform and founded her own consulting firm to help organizations navigate political and social challenges. A former CNN commentator, she now co-hosts *The Weeknight* on MSNBC.

Symone has served as a fellow at Georgetown University, Harvard Kennedy School's Institute of Politics, and USC's Center for the Political Future. A Nebraska native, she holds an honorary doctorate from American University and is a proud member of The Links, Incorporated. She lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband, Shawn Townsend.

ENTERTAINMENT

LEON TIMBO

Singer and Songwriter

Accompanied by **Torri Rogers**



Some write music as a creative release. Others feel compelled to perform. For country-soul singer-songwriter **Leon Timbo**, music is a form of growth and healing. Timbo has regarded music as an indispensable aspect of his life for as long as he can remember. Growing up the son of two pastors in Jacksonville, FL, music was integrated into his life from the very start, as a way to communicate spiritual experience. Along with his parents, his grandmother Virginia was one of the first to introduce him to music by singing him Ray Charles-styled songs and later buying him his first guitar at the age of 17. From there, his musical aspirations took flight.

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MISSION

The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law is a non-partisan, nonprofit organization, formed in 1963 at the request of President John F. Kennedy to mobilize the nation's leading lawyers as agents for change in the Civil Rights Movement. Today, the Lawyers' Committee uses legal advocacy to achieve racial justice, fighting inside and outside the courts to ensure that Black people and other people of color have the voice, opportunity, and power to make the promises of our democracy real. The Lawyers' Committee implements its mission and objectives by marshalling the pro bono resources of the bar for litigation, public policy, advocacy and other forms of service by lawyers to the cause of civil rights.

THANK YOU!

The Board and Staff of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law would like to convey our deepest gratitude to partners and sponsors of our Higginbotham Leadership Awards Gala.

Together, we are championing justice and equality and building an inclusive democracy.

LAWYERS' COMMITTEE'S LEADERSHIP AND BOARD

DAMON T. HEWITT

President and Executive
Director, Lawyers' Committee
for Civil Rights Under Law



Damon Hewitt, a long-time civil rights lawyer, social justice strategist, philanthropist, manager and coalition-builder, currently serves as the President and Executive Director of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.

Prior to joining the Lawyers' Committee, Hewitt served as inaugural executive director of the Executives' Alliance for Boys and Men of Color. He previously served as Senior Advisor at the Open Society Foundations where he coordinated funding efforts responding to the uprising in Ferguson, Missouri. Before entering philanthropy, Hewitt worked for over a decade as an attorney at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund where he was lead counsel on litigation and policy matters and supervised teams of lawyers and non-lawyers. He led pioneering efforts addressing the School to Prison Pipeline and coordinated litigation and advocacy efforts following Hurricane Katrina. Hewitt also served as Executive Director of the New York State Task Force on Police-on-Police Shootings, an entity analyzing police practices following the deaths of off-duty African American and Latino police officers who were shot by fellow officers after being mistaken for "criminal" suspects.

Hewitt is co-author of a book, *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Structuring Legal Reform*, and has published numerous articles on racial justice, school discipline policy and progressive education reform. He holds a B.A. in Political Science from Louisiana State University and a J.D. from the University of Pennsylvania Law School.

ROSCOE JONES, JR.

Dean and Professor of Law
Drake Law School &
Lawyers' Committee Co-Chair



Roscoe Jones, Jr. is the Co-Chair of Board of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. He is the Dean of the Drake Law School and first Black dean in its history. He has taught at Yale, Chicago, Georgetown, and University of Michigan Law Schools and the Harvard Kennedy School.

He was a Partner and Co-Chair of the Public Policy Group at Gibson Dunn. He served on Capitol Hill from counsel to chief of staff, working for Rep. Abigail Spanberger and Senators Dianne Feinstein, Cory Booker, and Patrick Leahy on the Senate Judiciary Committee. He was special counsel to the Tom Perez, Assistant Attorney General for Civil Right; appellate attorney in the Civil Rights Division; and assistant U.S. attorney in the Western District of Washington. He clerked for Judge Carl E. Stewart on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit and Judge Alexander Williams, Jr. on U.S. District Court of Maryland. He graduated from Stanford University and the University of Virginia Law School, where he was Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Social Policy & Law*.

He is a member of the American Law Institute, the Council on Foreign Relations, and a fellow of the American Bar Foundation.

MICHAEL E. SWARTZ

Partner, Quinn Emanuel
Urquhart & Sullivan LLP &
Lawyers' Committee Co-Chair



Michael Swartz is a Partner in Quinn Emanuel's New York office. Michael's practice focuses on shareholder activist litigation, investment fund disputes, M&A litigation, and securities litigation.

Michael led a pro bono team that represented the last three living survivors of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre in a lawsuit that sought justice for the survivors and Greenwood, the once prosperous Black community in Oklahoma that was attacked by a white mob, who killed hundreds of Black residents, injured thousands more and destroyed more than a thousand homes and businesses. Michael also joined the legal team advocating for justice on behalf of the Palm Springs, California Section 14 survivors, who were relegated to a small neighborhood known as "Section 14" because of racist restrictive covenants only to have the City of Palm Springs and its agents burn and bulldoze their homes in the 1960s, demolishing the neighborhood to make way for commercial development.

Michael has been recognized in Chambers USA, The Legal 500 US, Benchmark Litigation, Lawdragon 500 Leading Litigators in America, and New York Super Lawyers for his achievements on behalf of his clients. Michael serves as Co-Chair of the Board of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.

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