Judge Raja Rajeswari is the first female south Asian judge in New York City. (Credit: City Hall / City Hall)

**NEWS**

**Diverse group of NYC judges to be sworn in by mayor Monday**

By IVAN PEREIRA April 26, 2015

The faces behind the benches are about to get more diverse.

Mayor Bill de Blasio will swear in 28 city judges Monday and more than half are minorities. The class of jurists, who will serve in criminal, civil and family courts throughout the five boroughs, include many firsts for New York, such as the first Korean American female judge and the first South Asian-American judge. Plus, 20 of the judges are women.
"To ensure New Yorkers have access to a fair, equitable justice system, we need judges who are qualified, honest and reflective of the people of this city," the mayor said in a statement.

Twenty of the judges being sworn in are new appointees while the rest are re-appointees. Ten of the jurists are black, four are Hispanic, two are Asian and four identify as LGBT. amNewYork had the opportunity to speak with three of the new judges.

Raja Rajeswari, 43, Staten Island Criminal Court

Rajeswari grew up in Chennai, India and said from a very young age she wanted to promote justice.

Her parents taught her to be open minded and respectful of people regardless of their gender, spirituality or upbringing and those lessons were ingrained in her.

But that wasn't the same elsewhere.

"Some of these friends of mine were brilliant in school, and they would make excellent teachers, doctors, professors if they were encouraged to study," she said.

Rajeswari and her mother moved to New York in 1988 while her father remained in India to help support them. She attended the College of Staten Island and then Brooklyn Law School before starting her job at the Staten Island DA's office.

Rajeswari, who is married and has a daughter, eventually became the deputy chief of the borough's Special Victims Unit.

"What struck me the most was the victims and the cases of the children and the women. It resonated with me because I've seen it all of my life," she said.

About a year and a half ago, Rajeswari said she thought about applying for a judgeship after her final conversation with her father before he passed away, in which he urged her to follow her dreams. This month, she made that dream a reality, becoming the first woman judge of South Asian background in New York City.

She said she hopes the appointment will inspire women around the world to pursue legal careers and make a difference.

"If you believe in something and work hard, you can achieve it," she said.

Judge Michael Milsap, 63, Bronx Family Court

Milsap was born in Mississippi amid segregation so graduating college and earning a law degree from Indiana University was more than just a personal accomplishment.

"I was the first of my family to graduate from college and this was all a very big deal for them and my community," he said.

After working for an Indiana legal services group, Milsap moved to New York in 1984 and joined a nonprofit that specialized in improving prisoners' rights.

He worked for the city's Human Resources Administration and served as a support magistrate in the Family Court. After 21 years in that position, Milsap said applying for the judgeship was a no-brainer.

"It's a culmination of what my professional career had been," said.

Milsap, who is a member the Metropolitan Black Bar Association and the Association of Gay and Lesbian Judges, said he is proud to represent a more diverse court.

"I think people who have contact with the court system would like to know the face of the court looks like them to an extent," he said.

Judge Kathryn Paek, 45, Manhattan Criminal Court

Paek moved from South Korea to Queens with her parents and siblings when she was a child and caught the law bug when she interned at the Legal Aid Society during college at NYU.
"What I wanted to do, is dig in deeper to the social issues," she said.

After graduating from Northwestern Law School in 1995, Paek worked for the Brooklyn and Nassau offices of the Legal Aid Society before serving as the chief of staff in the Office of Policy and Planning for the New York State Office of Court Administration.

She said she enjoyed more of an administrative role but wanted to get back to court.

"What was appealing for me was the tremendous amount of responsibility," Paek said.

That responsibility also extended to her heritage, since Paek is the first female Korean judge in the city. The judge said experiencing her parents adjust to the American way of life gave her a first hand look at how immigrant residents can struggle to comprehend the law.

"There is a particular voice that I can give," she said. "I think I have a more global understanding of what the issues are and where the pressure points are in the system."
NYC judges: Diverse group to be sworn in by de Blasio Monday - am New York