

IL BOLLETTINO

THE ITALIAN-AMERICAN LAWYERS ASSOCIATION OF LOS ANGELES (IALA)

Meet Judge COCO, if You Haven't

Interviewed By Mariana Noli

M: I virtually met Judge Gloria Grace Coco during our IALA August Zoom program honoring Italian American female leaders. I was first introduced to her by Frank Sommario and pleased to learn she would be joining us in Southern California. Not only is

our Bollettino edition for Women's History Month. Thank you, Judge Coco, for joining us and sharing your life and experience with us! Where should we start? law school? Acting? Family? being Italian?



From left to right: IALA Past President Alice Salvo, Judge Gloria Coco (ret.), Immediate IALA Past President Mariana Noli and Theresa Costanzo at the Happy Hour event hosted by Holland & Knight

she one of our newest IALA members, I thought how appropriate to feature the first female President of the Justinian Society of Lawyers in Illinois in

Judge Coco: I am very happy to be here!! well, I started my career as a primary school teacher in Chicago. I loved my

President's Messagio

*"Gideon's Trumpet"***
(***coined by Anthony. Lewis)*

March Greeting from the Italian American Lawyer's Association. In the month of March in the year that I was born, The United States Supreme Court issued the landmark decision of "Gideon verses Wainright". In its ruling the Court stated that the 6th Amendment of the United States Constitution required the government to appoint legal counsel to indigent defendants in criminal cases. As a result, Public Defender offices were created across the county. One such Public Defender is the President's current Supreme Court Justine nominee: Ketanji Brown Jackson.



2022 IALA President Tony and his wife Theresa

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job as a teacher but when I realized that my life would be regimented by bells, the 8am bell, the 10am bell, I knew I had to find something else to do with the rest of my life so I enrolled in law school. My father was a lawyer who had graduated Chicago-Kent law school in 1931 and one of the first members of the Justinian Society of Lawyers of Illinois, which was founded in 1921.



Judge Coco's father, Samuel J. Coco, one of the original members of the Justinian Society of Lawyers, circa 1923

M: That is right, we celebrated together the 100th anniversary of the Justinian Society of Lawyers in Chicago last year!

Judge Coco: Once I finished law school, I clerked for a criminal defense attorney. I was very fortunate to become an Assistant Cook County, Illinois, States Attorney in 1980. In 1985, I went to the Illinois Attorney General Office, where I started working on state

benefits fraud cases. In 1991, I got on the bench, where I heard all sort of cases, mainly criminal because of my background. By 1993, I was assigned to the Domestic Violence Division and I was supervising judge of all the Domestic Violence courts in Chicago. We heard about 55,000 cases a year and I oversaw this division for 10 years.



First Female President of the Justinian Society of Lawyers in Illinois in 1993 with Communications Award-recipient Dennis Farina, Actor, former Detective, Chicago Police Department

M: What an impressive legal career, Judge Coco! Did you have a connection to California then?

Judge Coco: Actually, yes. My mother's older sister Carmela and her husband Frank were from Sicily. In 1921 they arrived to Chicago, opened a small grocery store.

They did quite well, and in 1948 they decided to move to California. On their way to Anaheim, they stopped to visit some friends in San Jose. They ended up buying a small motel, which was not the best of the investments but the reason for our family to end up in California. When they passed away, they left the properties to my sisters who relocated here. At that time, I had already passed the bar exam in Illinois and I had a great job so I decided to stay in Chicago.

M: Knowing the different March weather in Chicago and California, I bet sometimes you regret that decision!



At the 1993 Installation of the JSOL with Award of Excellence recipient-Geraldine Ferraro, First Woman Vice Presidential Candidate, USA

Judge Coco: Yes, ha! Truth is that I love Chicago and I have been very fortunate. But, the weather in California at this time of the year is just so wonderful in comparison! I

have to say I do regret not listening to my mother when she kept telling me “*Gloria, take the California bar exam.*” I bought the books, but never got to sit for it.

Not only do I have family in California, I have other connections as well. While working as a lawyer, we used to work very closely together with California in the 80s and 90s. I was part of a group called the NAAG (National Association of Attorney Generals) and we would work particularly with California to implement these rules in the domestic violence area, consumer protection as well as other areas of the law. In some situations, we would see which rules were implemented, what actions California was taking, what had worked and made implementations in Illinois.

But what has brought me closer to California now relates to my love for theater, which I developed at a young age. While I was a judge, I went back to school to get a degree in radio, television, and theater performance. And after graduation, I spent some time in California pursuing my acting career.

M: That is really wonderful! This is the place to be for acting.

Judge Coco: Yes. Well, while my friends are moving to

Florida to retire, I am moving to California to keep acting! Ha! When I think about my love for acting, I owe it to my mother who sent me to dance and acting classes when I was 3 years old. By the age of 10 years old, I was performing in front of an audience, I did a solo at The Bozo Show by WGN-TV in Chicago, I also jumped out of a pumpkin during the Lee Phillip show. Her daughter Lauralee Bell is here in California.

M: Absolutely amazing! Do you have any photos of those performances? I would love to see those. I had no idea that you already had such a successful acting career as well. I thought you were about to start pursuing your acting career!



At the 1993 JSOL Installation as the first female President with the other officers

Judge Coco: Thank you, Mariana. Well, after retiring in 2007, I completed in 2008 a week-long bootcamp one of my friends recommended in California. At the end of the bootcamp, the students had the opportunity to perform in front of many agents and talent recruiters. My friend

who recommended it, said if anyone likes you, they will contact you. And they did!

I have been very blessed. I remember after the bootcamp was over, I went to visit my nieces in Northern California. I was at the California Pizza Kitchen with my godson, my niece’s son, when I received the call from an agent who had seen my performance and really liked me. He said “*You remind us of Estelle Getti from the Golden Girls*” I guess I did because I am 4’10”!



At the 1993 JSOL Installation, Judge Coco and Geraldine Ferraro

M: I am short too; I am sure that was not the reason for the call back from the agent!!



With Dennis Farina, recipient of the Communications Award

Judge Coco: You know Mariana, I always think of a conversation I had with my

mother when I was told I was too old to go to law school. When I was a primary school teacher, going to law school, I remember the principal said I would be too old by the time I graduated law school. Since I waited three years to enroll to law school after college, I was to graduate at age 28. I asked my mother “Mom, do you think I am too old to go to law school?”



My mom looked at me and answered that question in a way that became a motto for the rest of my life. She said “Gloria you are going to be 28 years old anyway, you may as well be 28 and a lawyer!” After that conversation with my mother, I have continued to approach my major life decisions guided by my mother’s wise advice. I was going to be a 40-year-old woman anyway, I may as well be 40 and a judge. I was going to become a 57-year-old anyway so I become an actress!

M: Beautiful words and there is so much truth to them! Thank you for sharing that advice with

us because I will apply it moving forward. You certainly shine bright like a star, Judge Coco!



In 1993- receiving President’s gavel from retiring President Joseph Bisceglia

Judge Coco: You are very kind Mariana. I am grateful to be in California and I am happy to be part of IALA, meeting so many wonderful people Alice, Lydia, I feel like I found my new home here.



Recent headshot of Judge Coco

I enjoyed attending the event at Holland & Knight and I hope to attend future events. Unfortunately, I missed the brunch at the Museum of the Academy for Motion Pictures. We will also miss the Garlic & Gaelic Night with the Irish-American Bar Association, which is too bad. My husband

who is Irish would have loved to be there! But you can count us in for future events.



Judge Coco sworn in as the first JSOL woman officer, as Secretary in 1986

It has been a wonderful journey as a lawyer and judge, I want to continue to give back whenever possible. I know that my experience as part of the bench, as a lawyer and as a leader prepared me for my acting career. Many of my performances relate to me being a judge. It also can be quite intimidating to speak in front of such a large audience!



From left to right: Alice Salvo, Mel Stein, Jenny Stein, Lydia Liberio, Mariana Noli and judge Coco at the NIABA dinner in Chicago, Illinois (Oct. 2021)



Judge Coco celebrating the 100th year anniversary of the JSOL in Chicago

M: You are so inspirational! I have no words to thank you for giving me a chance to learn more

about you and your incredible legal career! On behalf of IALA, we officially welcome you to la

nostra famiglia. Ci vediamo a Casa Italiana! Grazie Mille!

March is also Women's History Month. The Italian American Lawyer's Association recognizes the historical significance attached to the nomination of Circuit Court Judge Ketanji Jackson Brown to the Supreme Court. For the first time in history an African American woman has been nominated to the Supreme Court. When she is confirmed, she will also be the first Public Defender chosen for the high court.



Born in Washington and raised in Miami, Ketanji Brown Jackson clerked for three federal jurists, including Justice Stephen Breyer. Source: Kevin Lamarque/AFP/Getty Images

The Italian American Lawyer's Association, like other bar Associations, firmly believes in the inherent concept of equal justice guaranteed to all. We have no doubt that the president's bold nomination will further this goal and impact our diverse legal community in this historic month of March. When confirmed, future Justice Jackson will join that same court that gave her the opportunity to "Trumpet" justice for the benefit of us all. "Molto Orgogliosa".

*Anthony Vito Costanzo
President - Italian American Lawyers Association Deputy
Public Defender*



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Opera Program 2:00 p.m.
Supper served 3:15 p.m.
No host Bar will be open

*Hello!
Ciao?*

Adults	\$46
Seniors 60+	\$34
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*Includes both Supper & Opera
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