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MISSION STATEMENT

The Richard C. Failla LGBTQ Commission of the New York State Courts is dedicated to promoting equal participation and access throughout the court system by all persons regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

To fulfill this mission, the Commission protects and enhances diversity and promotes the presence of the LGBTQ judicial and non-judicial personnel within the Unified Court System.

OUR EFFORTS INCLUDE

- Training and educational programs for judges, non-judicial personnel, and court partners.
- Building collaborative relationships with LGBTQ advocacy organizations, bar associations, the legal profession, and community groups to raise awareness about LGBTQ issues and to foster a more supportive environment.
- Fostering sensitivity for and progress by LGBTQ persons in our courts.
- Demonstrating a public commitment to respecting the dignity and equality for all who come through our courthouse doors.

RICHARD C. FAILLA

In December 2016, the New York State Unified Court System established a new commission to address issues facing the LGBTQ community for both employees and litigants. The Richard C. Failla LGBTQ Commission of the New York State Courts is named after the late New York State Supreme Court Justice and LGBTQ rights advocate Richard C. Failla.

Born in Queens in 1940, Richard C. Failla received his undergraduate degree from the University of Florida in 1962 and his law degree in 1965 from Columbia Law School.

Failla started his legal career in the military, where he served as a lieutenant in the Navy's Judge Advocate General's Corps for five years. While stationed in the Philippines and in Vietnam, he often volunteered to defend sailors who were facing discharge due to their sexual orientation.

After his service, Failla joined the Manhattan District Attorney's Office as an Assistant District Attorney. Early in his career there, he chastised an attorney who, he believed, was charging exorbitant fees to gay defendants; in response, she threatened to expose him as a gay man. As a direct result of her threat, he decided to come out, despite the risk to his career.

In 1978, Mayor Edward I. Koch named Failla as Chief Administrative Law Judge in the newly formed Office of Administrative Trials and Hearings (OATH). OATH currently sponsors an annual Richard C. Failla OATH Law Clerk Fellowship.

Next, in 1985, Mayor Koch appointed Failla to the New York City Criminal Court, making him the first openly gay person to be appointed to that court. Three years later, he won an uncontested election to the New York State Supreme Court, becoming the first openly gay person elected to that court.

During the height of the AIDS epidemic, Justice Failla joined the Board of Directors of the Gay Men's Health Crisis and later became its Vice President; he also served as a member of the State Health Department's Advisory Council on AIDS.

Throughout his career, Justice Failla won awards from LGBTQ rights organizations, including Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund and the Lesbian and Gay Law Association of Greater New York (LeGaL). He was also honored in 1986 by the Fund for Human Dignity and awarded its Howard Brown Memorial Award. His speech accepting that award, published in "Speaking for Our Lives: Historic Speeches and Rhetoric for Gay and Lesbian Rights (1892-2000)," edited by Robert B. Ridinger, is an exhortation to members of the community to provide financial support for organizations involved in gay and lesbian activism.

Justice Failla died on April 11, 1993, at the age of 53, leaving behind a remarkable legacy of achievement and commitment to justice for all.