

The 14th Annual Judges Dinner (2026)

Judge Leonard Edwards (ret.), NCJFCJ Past Preident

The 14th Annual Judges Dinner was the best yet. Once again, the dinner was held at the Chuckhansi Gold Resort in Madera County. The resort outdid itself with an excellent seated dinner. Over 200 attendees participated in the pre-conference activities, the largest group ever to attend this event. The planning team was led by Leah Luhan and Sunni Dominguez, Judge Dean Stout (ret.), Olivia Thomas, Brett Lee Shelton, and many others.

A somber note cast a cloud over the dinner. Chief Judge Richard C. Blake, the beloved Hoopa Valley Tribal member and the Chief Judge of the Hoopa Valley Tribal Court, passed away shortly before the conference. He had a remarkable career including Chief Judge of the Redding Rancheria Tribal Court and Appellate Judge for the Cow Creek Tribe in Southern Oregon.

Richard was known nationally as President of the Board of the National American Indian Court Judges Association (NAICJA) and board member for 13 years representing Region 2. He was a founding member of the Northern Tribal Court Coalition and a member of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) where, in 2016, he was named "Innovator of the Year."

In 2009, Richard wrote a letter to Ronald M. George, Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court, asking the Chief Justice to create a forum for tribal court judges and state court judges as equal partners to discuss their relationship and to improve the administration of justice. Chief Justice George created the Tribal Court-State Court Forum which is still active today. The Judges Dinner recognized Judge Blake as a leader and friend.

The speakers at the conference were outstanding. First, Presiding Judge Kathleen A. Quigley of the Pima County Superior Court and then President of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) described her work in creating a court where the Indian Child Welfare Act (the ICWA) was followed in law and in spirit. She described the Pima County efforts to build into their court the spirit of the ICWA, document progress, train all participants on the ICWA, and improve outcomes for Indian children. It was the most informative description of a large court working to create an environment where Indian children were the focus of the proceedings.

She was followed by Justice William Thorne (ret.), a national expert on the ICWA, who described efforts to go beyond the wording of the ICWA and to implement the spirit of the law. Justice Thorne used examples from around the country to demonstrate how some jurisdictions have introduced innovations that improved outcomes for Indian children. Justice Thorne, a Pomo/Coast Miwok Indian from Northern California, has given more trainings about the ICWA than anyone in the country. He is a former Board member of the NCJFCJ.

Judge Shawna Schwarz, the Supervising Judge of the Santa Clara County Superior Court dependency court, gave a video presentation following up her talk at the previous dinner describing what the California Supreme Court



From left: Judge Dean Stout (ret.), Judge Kathleen A. Quigley, Justice William Thorne (ret.) and Judge Leonard Edwards (ret.)

has written about the ICWA. Thereafter, Judge Dean Stout (ret), Sara Davis (division chief of the California Judicial Council), and Terrie Robinson described the activities of the Tribal Court-State Court Forum and its accomplishments. Judge Stout also presented with Michelle Castagne and Anonda Nelson on the issue of the impact of the ICWA in guardianship cases and whether such cases should be heard in the Probate Court or the Juvenile Dependency Court.

As one participant noted: "I was told that it was better than the information received at both the CA State ICWA conference and the NICWA."

Planning for the Judges Dinner for 2027 Conference is underway already.