

Chief Judge Dora L. Irizarry
Introduction of Okieriete “Oak” Onaodowan
Keynote Speaker: Constitution Day
Special Session of the Court
September 16, 2016

It is a real treat for me to introduce our keynote speaker for today, the talented actor and Grammy Award winner, Mr. Okieriete Onaodowan, who apparently is known by the nickname, the “Incredible Oak.” I knew that the Great Oak Tree has tremendous significance in the history of the United States, so I did what any educated person would do, I “googled it.” And from what I have learned about our speaker, Oak seems to be a fitting nickname.

The mighty oak is a national symbol of the United States, chosen by American voters from all walks of life in 2004. It has been known to grow up to over 100 feet and produces acorns for thousands of years, which sustained many Native American

tribes. Its amazing strength, beauty, and longevity have made the oak a central part of much of American history. Abraham Lincoln found his way across a river near Homer, Illinois, using the Salt River Ford Oak as a marker. The Richards White Oak in Cecil County, Maryland once served as a landmark on a 1681 map used by William Penn. Andrew Jackson took shelter under Louisiana's Sunnybrook Oaks on his way to the Battle of New Orleans. And Old Ironsides, the USS Constitution, earned its nickname from the strength of its live oak hull, famous for easily repelling British cannonballs. But perhaps the most meaningful reference comes from the Pechanga, a Native American Tribe of the Western United States, who are responsible for creating one of the largest national preserves of oak trees in this country. The Great Oak has come to embody the identity and character of the Pechanga Band: strength, wisdom, longevity and determination.

That brings us to our guest of honor. Oak's parents emigrated to the United States from Nigeria and settled in West Orange, New Jersey where Oak was raised with his five sisters and went to school. We are honored to have his mother and sister here with us today. Oak's interest in theatre was sparked early, in the 7th grade, with a non-speaking role in *Bye Bye Birdie*. A high school football injury made Oak seek other activities, including theatre, which he has dedicated himself to ever since.

Mr. Onaodowan has an impressive list of theatrical, film, and television credits to his name, too long to mention here. He is part of the original Broadway cast of *Hamilton*, which presently plays at the Richard Rodgers Theatre on Broadway. This musical has won wide acclaim; it has been performed at the White House and has earned a Grammy Award for the cast album. *Hamilton* tells the story of the life of Alexander

Hamilton, an immigrant from the British West Indies who played a major role in the American Revolution as a trusted aid to George Washington, the drafting and adoption of the Constitution, and in the new United States government as its first Secretary of the Treasury. He was the only New York delegate to the Constitutional Convention who signed the United States Constitution, earning him the title of an American “Founding Father.” With John Jay, who later became the first Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court and James Madison, Hamilton was an author of *The Federalist*, essays that were critical in achieving the ratification of the United States Constitution.

In *Hamilton*, Mr. Onaodowan plays two roles that he helped to develop. In the first act, he plays Hercules Mulligan, an Irish-born tailor who was Hamilton’s friend, and an American spy in the British ranks during the American

Revolution, who provided Hamilton with strategic information. In the second act, he plays James Madison, a Founding Father who later became president of the United States.

As for the future, Mr. Onaodowan has been asked to play Kristoff in a lab version of the upcoming stage adaptation of Disney's *Frozen*.

It is with great pleasure that I present to you, Mr. Okieriete Onaodowan.