I have to admit, when I first considered a career in law, I imagined my job looking something like the episodes of Perry Mason that I watched as a child. Me, an exciting hero who saves the day, sees that justice is done, and has the power to win for every client. And while my career as a tax attorney has been very satisfying—it hasn’t been quite as exhilarating as an episode of Perry Mason. But, that power he had, the power to help a client, to see that justice is done, to defend the rule of law—the power that is the crux of every romanticized, court-room drama—that is something I now possess. Something most of us here possess.

I think it is easy, in the daily routine of our lives, to lose sight of the power that those of us in the legal profession have. Each of us has the power to defend the rule of law and fight for justice for everyone. In doing so, we strengthen the public’s faith in the rule of law and reinforce the fabric of American society. At this moment in time, the American rule of law is being challenged, both from inside our country and from without. Staving off these attacks should not be a partisan issue.

When I was commissioned as a Naval Officer, I swore an oath. That oath was not to the President or Congress, or even to the American people. I swore an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States—to support and defend the American rule of law. When each of us became a member of the bar, we took a similar oath. Ours is a profession similar to the armed forces. As lawyers, we are responsible for defending our county and the rule of law, and we have the power to do it. This power is different, of course, than the power of a battleship, but it is just as important to defending our democracy—and one day, achieving the aspiration of equal treatment and access under the law for everyone in our country. The most effective way for us to harness this power is through a bar association, where our individual voices can join into a clarion call.

I am particularly honored to have the opportunity to lead THIS bar association. NYCLA was founded on the principle that everyone should be treated equally. When other bar associations excluded lawyers from membership because of their ethnicity, religion, gender, or race, NYCLA welcomed all qualified members. Throughout its history, NYCLA has adhered to its core values, never failing to promote policies of inclusion and opportunity, always striving to promote equal justice under the law. I stand here today, as a beneficiary of NYCLA’s commitment to the principles upon which it was founded. In the not too distant past, I would have been marginalized for being a gay man. But not today; and for that, I am indebted to the leadership provided by this great Association. In
the words of former President Jim Kobak, NYCLA is the bar association of opportunity for all.

I am humbled to follow in the footsteps of the accomplished lawyers who have led the Association in the past. The footsteps of the former presidents here today, and especially of Carol Sigmond and Michael McNamara. Carol had the courage to make a bold decision and to propose an unpopular course of action that would ensure the vitality of NYCLA; to determine whether we should continue to stay in our current Home of Law. Under Michael’s leadership, the Association engaged in a thoughtful and deliberate process that reached an informed and unanimous decision; a decision that will ensure the longevity of the Association while allowing us to better serve our members. Years from now, when NYCLA members gather at annual meetings such as this one, they will owe the Association’s continued existence to the leadership of Carol and Michael. Because of their leadership and the vision of NYCLA’s Board, I am excited about the future of the Association, particularly in the upcoming year. We are now in a similar position as the founders of NYCLA were a century ago; we have the freedom to create a bar association that will serve the needs of current and future lawyers.

In 1926, during a debate of the NYCLA membership on whether to adopt a policy position that some argued would threaten plans for financing the building of our current Home of Law, the following statement was made about NYCLA:

I understood that we were going to erect a monument to our mission and not build a tombstone under which it is to be buried. If stone walls and iron bars do not a prison make, then bricks and mortar cannot make an institution like this one.

That statement was true in 1926 and it is true now. As grand as this building is, as much as we may miss gathering in this majestic hall, the bricks and mortar around us are not our great Association. While the home of NYCLA may change, its ideals and purpose will not: it will remain the bar association of opportunity and a champion of justice. Sophia Gianacoplos and her outstanding staff will continue to perform miracles to ensure that NYCLA achieves its mission and fulfills its commitment to its members.

What will change in the upcoming year is the way we serve our members. We now have the opportunity to create a bar association for the 21st century. Within a year, we will move into a new home; into a space that will allow us to better serve a new generation of lawyers through the use of technology and the ability to more wisely devote our resources to the Association’s programs.
During this transition, NYCLA will continue to fight for justice and to serve its members. This Association has pioneered some of the most far-reaching and tangible reforms to improve the rule of law, and our transition will not stop that. In 1997, NYCLA led the bar to increase fees for Article 18(b) attorneys in order to improve the quality of defense afforded to indigent defendants. Those rates have not changed in the last 15 years and a crisis is brewing, as I believe it has become increasingly difficult to recruit experienced attorneys to take on assigned counsel in order for the city and state to meet their Constitutional obligations. A society is rightfully judged by how it treats its least fortunate members. To this point, I am forming a task force to examine assigned counsel rates and whether they are sufficient. This is an issue that impacts equal treatment under the law and the public's faith in the rule of law. NYCLA took the lead on this issue two decades ago, and it will once again take the lead today.

In closing, I'd like to thank my colleagues from Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, who here today and who have always been supportive of my work with NYCLA. Thank you as well to my friends and family who are here. And last but not least, thank you to my husband, Marc. It is because of his counsel, support, and love that I stand before you today.

I have one final request. Most of you in this room are already active in the Association, but we all need to become missionaries of the bar, and encourage our colleagues to join us in supporting the rule of law through service to a bar association; particularly in the climate we face today. Service to the bar, is service to the public. I look forward to serving with each of you.

Thank you.