



Champions of Debate Gala

NEW YORK CITY **URBAN DEBATE LEAGUE**

2026



FTI Consulting is Proud to Sponsor the **New York City Urban Debate League**



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Champions of Debate Gala

NEW YORK CITY **URBAN DEBATE LEAGUE**

2026

Thursday, June 4, 2026

Honoring

Kathryn Wylde

Former President and CEO,
Partnership for New York City

Neal Kumar Katyal

Former Acting Solicitor General
of the United States
Partner, Milbank

NYC Urban Debate League
25 Broadway, 12th Floor
New York, NY 10004
www.debate.nyc





2026

THE GALA

TONIGHT'S PROGRAM

Welcome

Jesse Yeo, Board Chair

Better Together

Amisha Mody Mehta, Chief Executive Officer

Presentation of Champion of Debate Award to Kathryn Wylde

Michael Fricklas, Chief Legal Officer, Chief Public Policy
Officer & Corporate Secretary, Advance

Remarks

Kathryn Wylde, Former President & Chief Executive Officer,
Partnership for NYC

DINNER

Presentation of Champion of Debate Award to Neal Kumar Katyal

Gurbir Grewal, LAC Member

Remarks

Neal Kumar Katyal, Former Acting Solicitor General
of the United States & Partner, Milbank

Introduction of Student Speaker

Jarrod Atchison, John Kevin Medica Director of Debate
& Professor of Communication, Wake Forest University

Student Speaker

Katherine Hernandez, NYCUDL Debater

Closing

Brad Drummond, LAC Co-Chair

ABOUT THE NEW YORK CITY URBAN DEBATE LEAGUE

The New York City Urban Debate League was created in 2011 by a group of NYC school teachers, led by Founder Erik Fogel. They aspired to increase the number of debate programs in New York City Title I schools (schools where at least 50% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch). They were driven by both sheer passion for the activity and knowledge of debate's empirically proven ability to raise students' grades, graduation rates, and college readiness, while also preparing them to be more engaged and informed citizens.

When the NYCUDL was founded, fewer than 10 New York City Title I schools sponsored debate programs. The League started with these few schools, fundraising from simple bake sales, before incorporating as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit on May 9, 2012. Since then, the NYCUDL has grown massively. Today, we are the biggest Urban Debate League in the nation. In the 2025-26 school year, we served over 4,000 students from 250 NYC public schools, nearly 200 of which are Title I schools.

We serve these students through our Open League and partnerships with Community School Districts 6 in Manhattan; 7, 8, 9, & 10 in the Bronx; 13, 15, & 16 in Brooklyn; the city-wide Transfer Schools District; the NYC Reads Initiative; and the Bella Abzug Leadership Institute. We provide hundreds of hours of trainings, workshops, tailored and scaffolded curricula, lesson materials, and tournaments that enable students to develop and test a variety of key skills, including reading, writing, critical thinking, and self-advocacy. To narrow the opportunity gap, we strive to work with students in all stages of learning. Whether it be through our Spanish and Multi-Language Learner programs or our Dream Team run in partnership with Wake Forest University, all NYCUDL students are preparing to become the next generation of informed, compassionate, and courageous leaders.

While the League has grown from its humble beginnings, we maintain the same drive that motivated our founders. We are proud to be a mission-driven organization and provide students with an experience that, as we hope you will see tonight, has the power to transform and empower them to achieve their full potential.



Dear Friends of the New York City Urban Debate League,

It is my honor and joy to welcome you tonight as we gather to celebrate the extraordinary accomplishments of the New York City Urban Debate League and the remarkable students, staff, and community who make them possible. This evening is a true celebration—of hard-won achievements, of dedicated service, and of the thousands of young people whose lives have been transformed by debate. When the League was founded in 2012, fewer than ten Title I schools in the city had debate programs. Through the tireless work of our staff and the determination of our students, the League has grown from 100 students to nearly 4,000. Today, we stand proudly as the largest Urban Debate League in the country, serving over 250 New York City public schools, including over 190 Title I schools—a testament to what is possible when a committed team refuses to stop reaching higher.

Behind these extraordinary numbers are the powerful stories of thousands of students who have done the hard work, shown up day after day, and achieved things they once thought impossible. During my tenure on the Board of Directors, I have been continually inspired—not only by the transformative impact of debate on individual students, but by the unwavering dedication of our staff, coaches, and educators who make it all happen. Their commitment to excellence is visible in every tournament round, every prepared argument, and every student who steps to the podium with confidence. The League’s distinct approach equips students not just for success in debate, but for higher education, meaningful careers, and a lifetime of opportunities. These achievements belong equally to the students who earned them and the staff who believed in them.

Few things better capture the impact of debate than hearing directly from those who have experienced it. Tonight, we will hear from debate alumni, including one of our debaters, Katherine Hernandez, about the impact debate has had on their lives. We will also hear from the NYCUDL’s CEO, Amisha Mody Mehta, who will speak to the power of partnership in advancing the League’s mission. Through sustained

collaboration with a broad network of partners across the city’s expansive education landscape and in both the public and private sectors, the NYCUDL has expanded and deepened its reach, becoming an incredible engine of opportunity for our students.

The future we envision for our students is bright and illuminated by the persistent efforts of advocates like tonight’s honorees. Kathryn Wylde, former President & CEO of Partnership for NYC, has played a key role in building and maintaining New York’s thriving economy and advancing major civic initiatives across the city. Neal Kumar Katyal, former Acting Solicitor General of the United States and Partner at Milbank, is one of the nation’s foremost Supreme Court attorneys and an accomplished former debater. Both of our honorees are Champions of Debate not simply because they embody its core principles—reasoned dialogue, open-minded inquiry, and thoughtful engagement with complex issues—but because they illustrate the kind of informed, compassionate, and courageous leadership we hope to cultivate in every student.

On behalf of the Board, I want to extend our deepest gratitude to everyone who has made this League what it is today—our generous supporters, our devoted staff and coaches, and most of all, our extraordinary students. Tonight, we celebrate all of you. It is because of your commitment and hard work that thousands of New York City public school students have unlocked their potential, found their voices, and stepped confidently into the world as advocates, thinkers, and leaders. We are so proud of everything this community has achieved, and we look forward to achieving so much more together. Have a wonderful evening!

Sincerely,

Jesse Yeo

Jesse Yeo

Chairperson of the Board
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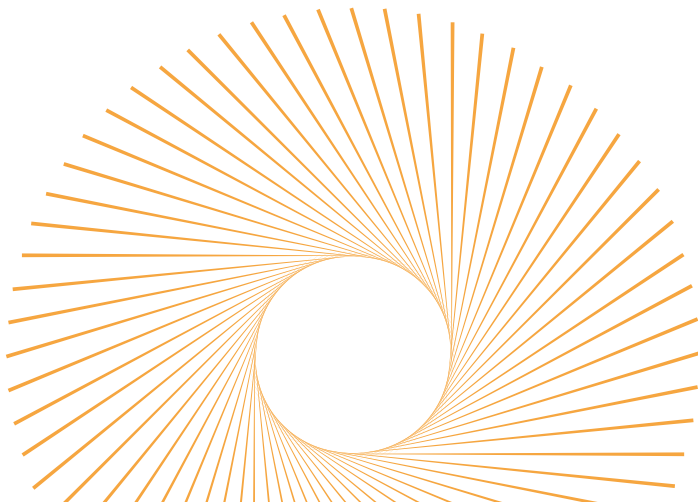
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**Kathryn Wylde**

Former President and CEO,
Partnership for New York City

Kathryn Wylde is an established civic and business leader in New York City. She recently stepped down after 25 years as President and CEO of the Partnership for New York City, the city's preeminent business organization. She continues to serve on a variety of public and nonprofit boards, including the NYC Economic Development Corporation, the New York State NYC Regional Economic Development Council, the Fund for Public Education, the Manhattan Institute, and the Partnership Fund for New York City. For fifty years, she has played a critical role in building and maintaining New York's thriving economy, as well as the revitalization of the city's neighborhoods, development of affordable housing, reform of the public education system, modernization of the public transit system, and advancing public health and safety. She is an urban policy expert and a frequent spokesperson on issues that impact the city and state, with a focus on delivering private sector resources and expertise to address challenges facing the city and state.

**Neal Kumar Katyal**

Former Acting Solicitor General of the United States
Partner, Milbank

Neal Katyal is one of the nation's foremost Supreme Court attorneys and former Acting Solicitor General of the United States. Neal just won the tariffs case in the Supreme Court against President Trump. He is a partner at Milbank's Washington, DC office, and serves as the Paul Saunders Professor of Law at Georgetown University, where he was one of the youngest professors to have received tenure and a chaired professorship in the university's history. He has argued 54 cases at the Supreme Court, including landmark cases on gene patents, Guantanamo, the Voting Rights Act, and corporate law. He received the highest honor the Justice Department can bestow on a civilian, the Edmund Randolph Award, and has won all sorts of other awards, including being named one of GQ's Men of the Year. He has performed in both Netflix's *House of Cards* and Showtime's *Billions* (both times playing himself).

Neal was a prolific member of the Dartmouth Forensic Union during his undergraduate years at Dartmouth College, reaching semi finals of the National Debate Tournament both in 1990 and 1991. Debate played a formative role in shaping his analytical approach to the law, teaching him to break down complex issues, think strategically, and communicate with clarity. He has described his Dartmouth debate coach, Ken Strange, as "the most important teacher of my life," a reflection of how deeply debate influenced his development as an advocate.

SPOTLIGHT STUDENTS



ALAN GARCIA

New York City Reads (Middle School)
Corona Arts and Sciences Academy
7th Grade

I joined debate after learning about it at school and deciding to give it a try. I love that debate allows me to connect with others while learning in a meaningful way. My proudest moment was my first tournament, because I stopped doubting myself and realized that I could really achieve something. I really liked the civil disobedience topic because both sides had strong arguments, which made for a very engaging debate.

Fun Fact: In my free time, I play electric and acoustic guitar.



ANALIAH MEJIA VALENZUELA

District 13
P.S. 046 – Edward C. Blum
5th Grade

Watching my sister participate in debate last year inspired me to try it myself. As a debater, I love researching topics and supporting arguments with evidence and data. I was so proud of myself for placing sixth in Spanish Debate. My favorite topic was artificial intelligence because it connects to everyday life.

Fun Fact: I like doing arts and crafts and reading in my free time.



CHRISTIAN MAIR

New York City Reads (High School)
Schuylerville Preparatory High School
11th Grade

I started debating through my high school's debate class. I enjoy debate because it challenges me to argue both sides of an issue. Having to research and engage with opposing perspectives has made the activity more interesting while also helping me develop more structured and thoughtful personal beliefs. Debate has taught me the importance of not limiting myself to one viewpoint, but instead fully understanding the arguments on all sides. I especially loved debating about mass surveillance, because it's a complex issue that requires balancing national security with individual privacy. My proudest moment was debating as a maverick against a two-person team, which pushed me to think critically and adapt in the moment.

Fun Fact: I am the founder of a non-profit in the Bronx.



EMMANUEL ESTEVEZ

Open League (Middle School Public Forum)
M.S. 136 – Charles O. Dewey
8th Grade

I first joined the debate team after my math teacher recommended it to me, and I quickly grew to love it. I enjoy researching topics that seem boring at first but turn out to be interesting and nuanced. My proudest moment was realizing how much I had improved as a debater this year. I had so much fun debating farm-to-school initiatives because it connects to real issues in schools and helped me build a strong partnership with my debate partner.

Fun Fact: I love Tabletop Role-Playing Games, such as Dungeons & Dragons.

SPOTLIGHT STUDENTS



ETHAN GIL

District 10
M.S. 390
6th Grade

My science teacher selected me for my school's debate team after noticing how actively I contribute to class discussions. What I love about debate is being able to express my opinion while arguing both sides of an issue. It has also helped me understand other perspectives while supporting my ideas with research. My proudest moment was working with my team to build on each other's ideas and present a strong, unified case. I really loved the generative AI topic because it connects to real-world issues we experience every day.

Fun Fact: In my free time, I enjoy playing basketball and chess.



FANTA KROMAH

District 9
J.H.S. 022 – Jordan L. Mott
8th Grade

I got involved with debate in 5th grade when I tried out for my school's team by writing a speech about school uniforms. Although I didn't make the team at first, I kept practicing and improving. My favorite parts of debate are the excitement of facing new opponents and competing. I was really proud of myself for winning the 2025 NYC Reads Championship with my team and placing second in my division in 2026. My favorite topics so far have been zoos and congestion pricing.

Fun Fact: My favorite artist is Michael Jackson.



JAXON CESPEDES

District 6
P.S. 153 – Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Elementary School
5th Grade

I got involved with debate when my coach, Ms. Castillo, asked me to join my school's debate club. What I love about debate is making claims, defending them, and responding to my opponent's arguments. My proudest moment was making my first claim at my first debate session, which felt like a big step forward for me. My favorite topic was farm-to-school initiatives because it focused on improving school lunches.

Fun Fact: My favorite hobby is building with LEGO pieces and creating advanced structures.



JOSHUA FERNANDEZ MARIA

Open League (High School Public Forum)
DeWitt Clinton High School
11th Grade

During my freshman year, I saw that my school had a debate club and decided to join. I enjoy hearing different perspectives through debate, as it gives you certain insights into others' characters that you couldn't really get otherwise. One of my proudest moments came in one of my first debate rounds, when I challenged my opponents' arguments so effectively that they completely reconsidered their own position. I loved debating organ donation because it combined ethical and practical arguments, allowing for a balanced debate on both sides.

Fun Fact: I love reading manhwa (Korean graphic novels)!

SPOTLIGHT STUDENTS



MOUNIA MANHA

District 15
M.S. 51 – William Alexander
8th Grade

My parents inspired me to join debate, since they both participated in debate when they were younger. I love the competitive thrill of arguing with logic while also building skills like critical thinking and public speaking. My proudest moment was at a recent tournament when my partner and I competed, even though we felt unprepared, and won our first team award. My favorite topic to debate was space exploration because it had strong arguments on both sides and was exciting to research.

Fun Fact: I love the color purple, reading, listening to music, and hanging out with my friends.



NAOMI MARTE ALCANTARA

District 8
P.S. 152 – The Evergreen School
5th Grade

I first joined the debate team when I saw there were tryouts and thought it would be a great opportunity to learn more. I love that debate makes my parents proud of me and opens up opportunities for my future. My proudest moment was winning first place at a tournament, especially because my parents were there to see it. My favorite debate topic was about zoos because I learned a lot about animals and was able to apply that knowledge in school.

Fun Fact: I share a birthday with my grandmother.



NAWRIN SADIA

NYCUDL Dream Team
University Neighborhood High School
12th Grade

I got involved with debate by joining my school's debate club. What I love most about debate is meeting new people and hearing different perspectives on arguments. My proudest moment of my debate career was passing on my skills and teaching middle school students about debate during the NYCUDL's Summer Debate Institute. My favorite debate topic was civil disobedience because it helped me understand how people respond to injustice in different ways.

Fun Fact: I will be attending New York University with a full-ride scholarship in the fall!



SERENITY RUSSELL

District 16
Madiba Prep Middle School
7th Grade

I got involved with debate when my elementary school teacher recognized my potential and encouraged me to join. What I love about debate is how it builds responsibility and critical thinking skills. Winning a top team award has been my proudest debate moment so far. My favorite topic to debate was space exploration.

Fun Fact: I'm an avid writer and am currently learning Spanish.

SPOTLIGHT STUDENTS



SHAILA COLON

District 7
South Bronx Academy for Applied Media
8th Grade

My elementary school teacher first introduced me to being part of a debate team, though I had always been interested in debate. As a debater, I enjoy learning how to defend my ideas clearly and respectfully without offending others. One of my proudest moments was earning Top Speaker and placing first with my team. I really loved debating generative AI and zoos because both were incredibly interesting topics, and debating the pro side of zoos challenged me to think from a completely different perspective.

Fun Fact: I'm part of a band!



SIMEI CAMPOS

Open League (Middle School Parliamentary)
West Prep Academy
7th Grade

I got involved with debate after my social studies teacher recommended me based on my strong reading skills. Debate has taught me how to express my thoughts and opinions on different topics. I was so proud of myself for winning a speaker award after working hard with my team to build strong arguments. My favorite debate topic was artificial intelligence because it was my first debate and helped me step out of my comfort zone.

Fun Fact: I'm from Panama!

STUDENT SPEAKER



KATHERINE HERNANDEZ

Open League (High School Public Forum)
NYCUDL Dream Team
Talent Unlimited High School
11th Grade

I have been involved in debate for seven years. I started debating through my middle school's debate program and have been involved with the activity ever since. I love the environment that debate creates. Regardless of the outcome, it brings people together and has allowed me to build meaningful friendships that extend beyond competition. My proudest moment was at a recent Open League tournament, when I realized how much my speaking skills have improved and how my dedication to debate has led to meaningful results. I really loved debating the resolution on banning corporate acquisition of single-family homes in the United States because of the depth of arguments on both sides, the strong clash it produced, and the challenge of exploring its many nuances.

Fun Fact: I major in singing and dancing at my high school, which allows me to perform all over New York.



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This sponsorship is in honor of all my Hendrick Hudson High School speech and debate classmates, as well as our Bronx High School of Science debate friends. We all benefited immensely from debate as high school students many years ago. We are thrilled to help provide debate opportunities for our next generation of leaders in the New York public schools.

– Eric Aboaf

A nighttime photograph of the New York City skyline, with the Empire State Building as the central focus. The city lights are visible, and the sky is a deep blue.

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Former President and CEO
Partnership for New York City

Neal Kumar Katyal

Former Acting Solicitor General of the
United States, Partner, Milbank LLP



Advance is proud to join Jesse Yeo in supporting
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acknowledging the outstanding leadership of
this year's honorees

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We join in celebration of the New York City Urban Debate League and this year's "Champions of Debate," Kathryn Wylde and Neal Kumar Katyal.

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Greenberg Traurig applauds the
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In appreciation of the outstanding leadership of the

New York City Urban Debate League's CEO
Amisha Mody Mehta

and its dedicated staff and volunteers who prepare
our NYC students for success—in competition,
school and in life.

The Yeo-Fairall Family



BakerHostetler proudly supports the **NYC Urban Debate League** in their mission to provide all students with the opportunity to become informed, engaged and confident advocates.

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Debate Honorees:
Neal Katyal, Partner at Milbank,
and **Kathryn Wylde**, Former
President and CEO, Partnership
for New York City

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Kathryn Wylde and
Neal Kumar Katyal.

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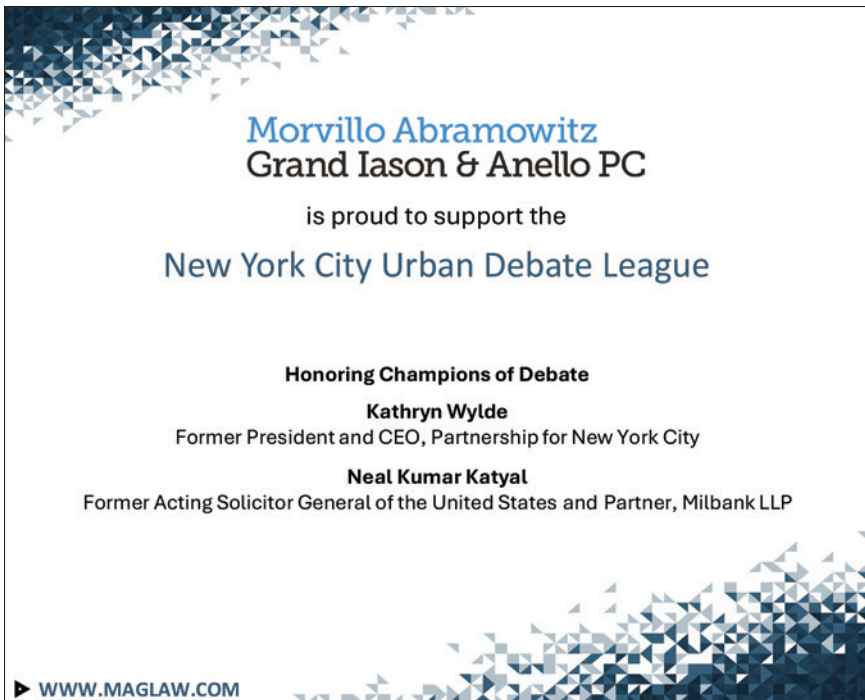
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The NYCUDL would like
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Your guidance and support
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