

Trailblazing Yurok Chief Judge Abinanti is North Coast Woman of the Year

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Judge Abby Abinanti, a dynamic and effective leader for equal access to the justice system and expanded resources and programs for Native American residents across California, has been selected by Senate Majority Leader Mike McGuire as the 2023 North Coast Woman of the Year.

Abinanti, known as “Judge Abby,” joined Senator McGuire for a ceremony this week on the Senate floor in recognition of the 42 “California Women Making Herstory” honorees.

Abinanti is trailblazer. She was the first tribal woman to pass the state bar and become a judge in California.

Judge Abby has served as a Yurok Tribal Court Judge since 1997 and she has proudly held the title as Chief Tribal Court Judge since 2007.

A member of the Yurok Tribe, Abinanti is an alumnae of Cal Poly Humboldt and holds a Doctor of Jurisprudence from the University of New Mexico School of Law.

Abinanti served as a Commissioner for the San Francisco Superior Court for over 17 years, assigned to the Unified Family Court and Dependency, a position she held in conjunction with her Superior Court assignment until 2015.

During her successful tenure as Chief Tribal Court Judge, Abinanti has been laser-focused in the Murdered & Missing Indigenous People (MMIP) crisis, which has disproportionately impacted women in the Yurok Tribe. She has led the way to significantly expand services and programs available to combat the MMIP crisis along with creating Yurok culturally-centered court services including Child Support Court, Wellness/Diversion/Intervention Programs, Substance Abuse Recovery, and the Legal Access Center.

“Judge Abby’s commitment to fighting for families, women, and tribal justice is second to none,” said Senator McGuire. “She built the Yurok Tribal Court, which is nationally recognized and respected as one of the best in America, from the ground up. Known for her innovative and holistic approaches to criminal justice and her relentless pursuit to combat the MMIP crisis, Judge Abby has helped countless individuals and families access justice and rebuild their lives. She’s an inspiration to all Californians.”

During her career, Judge Abby has taught in law schools including UC Berkeley and Stanford University. In 2020, Abinanti was recognized with the Lawrence R. Baca Lifetime Achievement Award by the Indian Law Section of the Federal Bar Association for dedicating her career to integrating Native values in the justice system.

“I’m deeply humbled to Senator McGuire for this special recognition and for highlighting the amazing work of the Yurok Tribe and our Council,” said Abinanti. “It’s an honor to share the Senate floor with this group of change-making women. I also know there is much more work ahead of us to ensure that our court systems reflect the values we hold important, including individual and community-based responsibility for those who err.

“As to the MMIP crisis, it is gift to know that Senator McGuire will not rest until we secure justice for all victims and their families and hold offenders accountable.”

The Senate Floor Ceremony can be viewed live at www.senate.ca.gov. Senator McGuire will celebrate with Judge Abby at a lunch on the North Coast in the coming months.