



## **S2: E6 “Defending Justice: A Conversation with Mano Raju, San Francisco Public Defender.”**

Moderator: Marie Mallare, S.J.D. Ethic Studies Professor

Guest: Manohar (Mano) Raju, San Francisco Public Defender

*Please note. Transcripts may be imperfect. Please contact the moderator should you have questions.*

00:00:00:22 – 00:00:39:00

Introduction

Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State's Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice, also known as CRISJ. We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. In this special edition Defending Justice, we will be talking about the legacy of Jeff Adachi, a native of Sacramento. The holistic programs and services of the San Francisco Public Defender's Office under the leadership of current San Francisco public defender Manu Raju.

00:00:39:14 – 00:00:56:14

Marie Mallare 1

I'm Dr. Marie Mallare, your host, and I'm here with Mano Raju, the current San Francisco Public Defender. Welcome. Hello. Hi. How are you?

00:00:56:29 – 00:00:57:22

Mano Raju 2

Hi, Professor.

00:00:58:14 – 00:00:59:29

Marie Mallare 1

Hey, how are you?

00:01:00:05 – 00:01:01:01

Mano Raju 2

Good. How are you doing?

00:01:01:20 – 00:01:02:20

Marie Mallare 1

So, Public defender Raju? How are you?

00:01:05:25 – 00:01:07:00

Mano Raju 2

I'm doing well. How are you doing?

00:01:07:23 - 00:01:32:23

Marie Mallare 1

I'm good. Okay, so let's start this. Thank you. really, for agreeing to do this, because I know that for a fact, you have been working with Jeff for a while. And with that said, you know, with his recent, you know, passing what was Jeff's legacy? What did he leave?

00:01:32:23 - 00:01:55:16

Mano Raju 2

You know, just the legacy is tremendous. One of the reasons I applied to the San Francisco Public Defender's Office to begin with was because I saw the movie 'Presumed Guilty', and that had a profound

impact on me. I was already a public defender in Contra Costa County. I was doing quite well, very happy there. But there was some feeling about, you know, seeing that movie.

00:01:55:16 - 00:02:16:02

Mano Raju 2

And a friend of mine was in the office and encouraged me to apply for it. I did it, but I would say Jeff Adachi, his legacy to me was that he really wanted us to be and they would often say the same. And Teresa Caffesse, she was the chief attorney, the best defense money can't buy. I mean, he really wants us to be better than private attorneys.

00:02:16:02 - 00:02:41:00

Mano Raju 2

And we wanted our clients to really see what it just felt, that notion of the public pretender in San Francisco. So even the idea of wearing the nice suit, coming in there, making sure our clients, you know, coming in with confidence, that was really important to him and another big legacy of his. And, you know, that's one of the reasons he recruited me to San Francisco, is that he really wanted the office to be a trial attorney, office trial focused.

00:02:41:12 - 00:03:02:24

Mano Raju 2

He was obsessed with us doing Trials. And, you know, I came in as a line attorney. That was the Training Director, Felony Manager. And when he passed, I became the public defender. But I was thrilled that in my last year as Felony Manager, along with another manager in my office, our felony unit did 80 trials. And that was the first time we had done 80 trials.

00:03:03:08 - 00:03:21:20

Speaker 2

Yeah. You know, it jeopardizes you know, it would jeopardize you as a public defender. So I know he was very, very thrilled about that. And that was the last year before he passed. So I'm glad that we were able to accomplish that for him.

00:03:21:20 - 00:03:43:27

Marie Mallare 1

Right. I do know Jeff being that he is really a fighter and in fact, you know that because he was my mentor as well. Right. And one thing I do love about Jeff is that he never gave up. And one thing that I also know is that he always recruits the best.

00:03:44:03 - 00:03:44:26

Mano Raju 2

Mmm.

00:03:45:19 - 00:04:08:01

Marie Mallare 1

That's true, right. Yeah. So how has it been since the recent passing of Jeff and now you are now the public defender appointed by Mayor London Breed. What have you accomplished? I know this is a lot and you can just talk about it.

00:04:08:01 - 00:04:31:27

Mano Raju 2

You know, it was real, obviously a sudden shock for a lot of us when Jeff passed away. And, you know, in many ways, the office, a lot of us were grieving and a lot of us are still grieving in one in one capacity or another. But I know that Jeff would want us to strive to be the best in every single capacity that we could.

00:04:31:28 - 00:05:08:12

Mano Raju 2

And that's something that he was really obsessed with. And I'm trying to continue that in a number of different ways. I'm really interested in us being an aggressive trial office, you know, and we talk about the Triangle of Public Defense, where warriors on the one hand, we're also activists and change agents. And we are also facilitators trying to get our clients to a better place and he started the magic program.

00:05:08:12 - 00:05:40:12

Mano Raju 2

And part of one thing he talked about is we're trying to work our way out of a job. We're trying to provide the, um, the conditions and uplift youth so that they don't actually come into the system to begin with. And that's our magic programs, and we will continue to grow our programs. But I'm trying to push out as many fronts as possible with the strategic planning process and we're thinking very intentionally about how do we defend at the highest level.

00:05:40:20 - 00:06:08:27

Mano Raju 2

And that means all of our units, our youth defender unit, our misdemeanor unit, our felony unit, our integration unit, all of the units. How do we our post-conviction relief unit, how do we confront state sponsored violence and advocate for community power art, which is our policy unit? And then how do we get the operations going as smoothly as possible so that we can get data from the defenders to the policy people so that we can make this kind of system change we need to make.

00:06:09:13 - 00:06:39:12

Mano Raju 2

So, I've been intentional about doing a strategic planning and really being forward thinking how can we have a three-year vision and then a lot of that vision? What's the issue then? What are some measurable? So, we've got a lot of new initiatives. We started we expanded our Clean Slate program threefold by reaching out to foundations. We have started out in the cycle program, which are boots on the ground, case managers connecting our clients with services.

00:06:40:09 - 00:07:30:22

Mano Raju 2

We have the first public police misconduct database connected to a public defender's office in the country. We started the Youth Young Defender Program, which is a paid high school internship for public school students, so that they can get exposed to all the different professions that we have investigator, paralegal, social worker, attorney, clerical, I.T. stuff. We started the Freedom Project, which is a project to bring people home who had been in custody for decades sometimes and either determined that it was a wrongful conviction, or if the judge now had discretion to strike, what are the enhancements we're doing that we actually sued ICE because of the horrific conditions in during COVID.

00:07:31:03 - 00:08:01:24

Mano Raju 2

And we get a lot of people home. We started the first of its kind in the country by the jury project. In the past, if you had a financial hardship, you would be excused for the jury. Now, in San Francisco, if you have a financial hardship, you'll be paid \$100 a day. I reached out to the Treasurer and so we've eliminated financial hardships in San Francisco and we started a filmmaking project and my predecessors named the Itachi Project because we know we need narratives.

00:08:01:24 - 00:08:17:16

Mano Raju 2

If we're going to actually move policy, we made three or four or five. We're doing other things with the Advocacy Project, but we're trying to move on that front too. So, it's an extremely exciting time right now in the public defender's office. They're really happy about all of our new initiatives.

00:08:18:19 - 00:08:38:25

Marie Mallare 1

My goodness, that's a lot. Seriously, that's a lot from the time that you sat as public defender and to think we had the pandemic. So how did that all, you know, come in play? Because the pandemic was pretty much everything was on halt. So.

00:08:40:09 - 00:09:06:17

Mano Raju 2

Yeah, it was, you know, a very unique challenge. I don't know if we've ever been in that situation before where you're trying to run the public defender's office, a public law office, which is very in-person profession, when the city is telling us we can only be in 20% time, you know, which is very challenging. So, you know, we had to adapt and we, you know, we got through it.

00:09:06:17 - 00:09:35:19

Mano Raju 2

It was very challenging, you know, but we managed and we kept on fighting. And one of the things that we actually did is because the courts were delaying cases, we passed the speedy trial deadline and which is a real problem for our clients because we they have the right to that speedy trial. We don't have that hard, probably that's our only that's our only weapon is our ability to prepare for a case through the investigation.

00:09:35:19 - 00:09:54:09

Mano Raju 2

We don't control the checkpoints and try cases. We don't control what's charged. You know, control for our clients are in custody, but we do control getting ready for Trial quickly and vindicating our client's rights. So, in that rustic way, we took the bold step and I along with the family members of our clients, actually sued the Superior Court.

00:09:55:05 - 00:10:20:22

Mano Raju 2

And we're asking for injunctive relief to make sure they prioritize and use every space and to be you know, I took an oath and I took it that we are going to fight, you know, and leave no stone unturned in the battle for our clients, and particularly in the racial justice era. That's their renewed sense of the need for, you know, commitment to racial justice in light of the moment, the George Floyd moment, the raid.

00:10:20:22 - 00:11:03:08

Mano Raju 2

And a lot of the clients are mostly BIPOC black and brown clients who were in custody well past the last day. So that's something, you know, we were pushing for. And we're going to continue to push and be an aggressive trial office while we're doing all the other things. So to me, it's not it's or it's and I think in this moment, meaning the moment this George Floyd tragedy moment means that we have to push to be the highest practice at the highest level in courts and also do the vigorous policy and community empowerment work on what we're doing simultaneously.

00:11:03:08 - 00:11:29:19

Mano Raju 2

I mean, like you, I came from the ethnic studies background actually. I TA'd in the ethnic studies at Berkeley twice while. Yeah, yeah. Race in the Law and also Race in the US with Carlos Munoz when I was at Berkeley, one of the founders of the Ethnic Studies Movement. So it's sort of coming full circle. Bringing that into public defender world is something that I'm trying to do.

00:11:29:26 - 00:12:04:20



Marie Mallare 1

It's great. You mention that because as a professor I bring all my experience that I've done working with Jeff and working for Jeff. I bring it to the university and to my students. I never cease to tell them what the reality is when it comes to justice and that's why it's really an injustice world out there.

00:12:04:20 - 00:12:16:17

Marie Mallare 1

So, moving on to my third question, how do you see yourself at the helm of the San Francisco Public Defender's Office moving forward as we're going into a reelection?

00:12:17:14 - 00:12:46:04

Mano Raju 2

Okay. Know, that's a great question. You know, it's San Francisco is the only county in California and one of the only couple in the country where there's the elected public defender. And that's why I'm taking advantage of this election season to really try to educate people about the potential of public defender, how much public defender power can really accomplish, the prevalence of wrongful convictions, which often happen by plea.

00:12:46:04 - 00:13:06:08

Speaker 2

It's not always the case. You hear about where there was a trial that you find DNA 30 years later. They happen every single day in courtrooms and they happened because of overcharging. They happened because of a trial. There where judges intimidate people into thinking they intimidate clients and say that they're going to give them much more time if they don't take this deal.

00:13:06:08 - 00:13:35:28

Mano Raju 2

And it happened because of pretrial detention. So, educating the public about them, educating the public about us for example, are in the cycle for public defenders cared deeply about public safety. Public defenders really care about community health and giving us on the ground case managers and social workers that can connect clients, really connect clients in a culturally competent way with needs, whether that's how to access benefits or class at City College or labor apprenticeship program, substance abuse counseling, a mentor or club access and benefits.

00:13:35:28 - 00:13:54:07

Mano Raju 2

And it may not be aware of or a combination of those that can do so much more for public safety for a fraction of the costs of more law enforcement. So, I think that this is a moment. I'm also the Chair of the San Francisco Democratic Party, and a lot of people reach out to me for my endorsement and I'm a citywide elected official.

00:13:54:07 - 00:14:26:08

Mano Raju 2

So, it's important that I embrace the importance of it being a political position because there's an elected sheriff and there's an elected district attorney in the ear of every legislator from every county in San Francisco. There's that elected sheriff, that elected district attorney, but there's only one elected public defender. So, I think it's really important that I embrace that and try to mobilize the political will of the people in San Francisco to try to bring about the change that needs to happen.

00:14:26:21 - 00:14:27:09

Mano Raju 2

Real system.

00:14:28:11 - 00:14:47:26

Marie Mallare 1

Thank you. Thank you for that. What do you want our listeners to know about the San Francisco Public Defender's Office and the importance of your work and the work of everyone at the Public Defender's Office? Because not everyone are attorneys, but everyone plays a part.

00:14:48:11 - 00:14:49:02

Mano Raju 2

Absolutely.

00:14:49:23 - 00:14:51:13

Marie Mallare 1

So, let's talk about that.

00:14:51:13 - 00:15:27:23

Mano Raju 2

Sure. One is I think I want people to know that we have a very creative public defender's office. I mean, I myself have tried almost every single kind of case from simple battery or assault misdemeanors to simple possession all the way up to every kind of case security of life sense that you can imagine. I'm really obsessed with how do we try to do everything within our power to ensure wrongful convictions don't happen from empower clients and getting to know clients to bring in community experts to bridge the gap between jurors.

00:15:27:23 - 00:16:05:21

Mano Raju 2

And sometimes we're communities that our clients, many of our clients come from to really hold the craft of presenting stories, the reality, you know, revealing truth and demanding justice in courtrooms and doing that, you know, consistently and really trying to use the courtroom skillfully to make sure the jurors don't come to the wrong decision. And that's something I'm very committed to and very committed to making sure we don't have defenders who are, you know, taking the easy way out or don't have that growth mindset to constantly improve.

00:16:05:21 - 00:16:30:01

Mano Raju 2

But you're right, we are much more than trial attorneys and half of our office is not. We have paralegals who are really supporting the work that we do on trial. We have investigators who are leaving no stone unturned in the investigation, even though we're severely outnumbered by the police department. We have social workers who are really connecting our clients with appropriate services out there.

00:16:30:01 - 00:16:55:12

Mano Raju 2

They're going to keep all of us safe. We have I've been really intentional about trying to get the pieces in place we need to make the policy changes we need to make. So, I've managed to get funding from the Board of Supervisors for a data person so we can start collecting it. Added that we need to make the appropriate changes more can be a communications staff member so we can start doing more of that.

00:16:55:12 - 00:17:21:16

Mano Raju 2

So, I want the public to know that the public defender's office by fighting hard against wrongful convictions, really does a lot for community health, healthy communities, healthy families and public safety. Because when someone gets wrongfully convicted, they're on probation or parole or doing time and they're not there for their family. And that makes the whole family more unstable.

00:17:21:16 - 00:17:46:02

Mano Raju 2

That makes their son or daughter or nephew with the that the person who's incarcerated can't support more vulnerable, more potentially susceptible to, you know, needing to resort to theft or something like that just to support themselves. Right. So, if we can get not have people get convicted and do more time and be on what's called paperwork, parole or probation for longer than they should be, that actually helps public safety.

00:17:46:02 - 00:18:24:26

Mano Raju 2

But also, we're in a unique position because we are mission driven, because we have people who deeply care about our clients to really, you know, connect those clients in the right way so they can have that growth that they need to have. And lastly, I would say that from a policy level, because we represent 25,000, the most vulnerable members in our society every year, and the work we do impacts not just them, but also their family, their ecosystem, potentially the next generation that we really need to be at the policy table because a lot of people are talking about what kind of policy changes need to happen.

00:18:25:05 - 00:18:49:18

Mano Raju 2

But we really in a very tangible level understand the real practical reality on our clients and how that spills over to everyone else. And I think COVID was a good example. You know, with COVID, we realized that if we don't, you know, a sort of say society is only as only you can judge a society by how it treats its most vulnerable.

00:18:50:00 - 00:19:11:17

Mano Raju 2

But we saw in COVID that that really was the case when we don't take care of our most vulnerable, who are incarcerated, who may get COVID when they come out, it's going to affect everyone else that spreads, right? So, we have to make sure we were treating people if they needed to be incarcerated, which, you know, I think, you know, so many should not have been.

00:19:11:17 - 00:19:36:26

Speaker 2

But if someone is incarcerated, we really should have made sure it was all, you know, that the conditions were such that COVID wouldn't be spreading. And that's very difficult to do. So, you know, we were intentional about trying to get as many people out, but you really saw that impact of, you know, how you treat your most vulnerable is going to impact everyone else in medical way.

00:19:36:26 - 00:19:51:06

Mano Raju 2

Right. But I think that's also the case. Socialize weekly, because if we don't treat the most vulnerable, well, then, you know, the things that people are upset about, like the car break, it's like that are going to be more common.

00:19:51:06 - 00:20:11:09

Marie Mallare 1

So definitely. Thank you. Yeah. That's those are really good points on that. And I want to end or conclude, at least for this part, a message to the community at large on the upcoming election and November 8th. Why is it important that.

00:20:13:13 - 00:20:37:17

Mano Raju 2

It's super important that our community exercise their/ our right to vote? And it's really important that we send and send a message that our public defender's office is super important, that the work we're doing is vital. I believe we're the best public defender's office in the country, but I'm not satisfied with where we're at. I'm concerned looking. What is it?

00:20:37:17 - 00:21:16:27

Mano Raju 2

Innovation. What is that extra staff member? What is that operation thing that we can operationalize to get us to the next level? And we've already had a number of things that are, you know, somewhat groundbreaking in this field. And I'm not satisfied. And I think when you get a bunch of passionate people, we're really willing to work hard in an office like ours, care about fighting, care about justice, who care about fighting for some of the most vulnerable people in our society, who care about the inequities, who really want to fight with skill and passion and put in the work.

00:21:17:07 - 00:21:47:01

Mano Raju 2

There's a tremendous amount as possible and I think that if the voters send a mandate and real like me, hopefully that can also translate into the growing budget needs that we have to make it. I tell City Hall, all the time, I think we'll do more with \$0.10 than a lot of agencies will do with \$10. And investing in US can have such a positive impact on society, particularly when we are getting back to the ethnic studies or connecting with community-based organizations.

00:21:47:01 - 00:22:16:08

Mano Raju 2

And, you know, whether it's the AAPI community or the Willie Brown Center in Sunnydale or a Latino task force or some of our strong Asian organizations that are doing amazing work, that potential public defender power, coupled with strong community-based organizations, can just do so much for our health and start to rectify some of the legacy of racial injustice.

00:22:16:08 - 00:22:19:25

Mano Raju 2

That's unfortunately been a virus in this country.

00:22:21:02 - 00:22:47:20

Marie Mallare 1

Well, thank you and thank you very much. I know that you are in ethnic studies. I really do. And I think this is really important because many people right now do not understand why ethnic studies is a requirement. As you know, the governor signed to AB 1416. I was very into the, you know, the campaign for that.

00:22:48:14 - 00:23:02:11

Marie Mallare 1

I actually brought a lot of people into the Capitol to actually lobby. Mm hmm. Mm hmm. And ethnic studies, together with fighting for justice was just a natural thing.

00:23:02:27 - 00:23:32:26

Mano Raju 2

Right? Yeah. You know, the other initiatives that we've been really active in Sacramento, we're very close to getting to be net passed, which would have prevented the double punishment. And, you know, people being transferred and deported from, you know, state and local custody. Exactly. Yeah. So that that's just so important because so many times the immigration consequences for our clients are actually much more severe than the criminal consequences of it.

00:23:32:26 - 00:23:58:21

Mano Raju 2

And the cooperation between state agencies and ICE is something that needs to stop a week. So we were very close to getting that passed. But also, you know, we were active in Sacramento and were successful in shortening probation terms for many offenses because the very common for the prosecutor to make an offer and say, you can go home today, get out of jail, but we're going to put you on probation for five years.



00:23:58:21 - 00:24:29:23

Mano Raju 2

And then that individual, you know, can't really move on with your life. And it's just very difficult to say no to that when you're in jail. Right. So we went to Sacramento, along with other partners, and we were successful in putting a cap of two years for many families and a cap of one year for many misdemeanors. We were also successful in making some reforms to the gang law, which has historically been really oppressive against black and brown community members who are going to trial.

00:24:29:26 - 00:24:54:25

Mano Raju 2

They're sort of trying to deal with what we're trying to focus on. What is the prosecution just bringing in all sorts of other stuff that has nothing to do with the incident? And we got some changes, including getting the word organized into the statute so that, you know, somebody, black and brown, youth and individuals and people in general would not be swept into gang prosecutions unfairly.

00:24:55:01 - 00:25:05:18

Mano Raju 2

So, we've been I've been very pleased with our efforts in Sacramento in trying to change the laws so we can have an impact not just on our clients, but on thousands and thousands of clients.

00:25:05:28 - 00:25:08:14

Marie Mallare 1

And I would love to have you speak maybe at my class.

00:25:08:29 - 00:25:10:13

Mano Raju 2

I would like to come down there.

00:25:11:08 - 00:25:13:22

Marie Mallare 1

Yeah. Or even on Zoom. Seriously.

00:25:14:02 - 00:25:32:05

Mano Raju 2

I'm sure. Well, I'm happy you're doing them also happy. I'm also happy to come down there. And the thing is, you know, fighting, there's a lot of youth who are like, they're in step with this moment and we are. And we need to march for the youth. Right? We need to learn from the youth and really, you know, bring up our field.

00:25:32:05 - 00:25:53:00

Mano Raju 2

You know, I'm but just as part of the system, often, you know, in meetings, the sheriff or the district attorney and or the, you know, the chief of police. But oftentimes, I'm also in community with youth and with, you know, some of the most powerful community-based organization and really the public defender. We have to be in both worlds.

00:25:53:02 - 00:26:11:17

Mano Raju 2

And I think it's so vital and I'm really trying to forge those bonds and to that raising of consciousness, because sometimes what we're doing is we're just we're moving the bar for what's possible. We want to make the policy changes now, but we also want to change the field of consciousness. And more positive changes can come in the years going forward.

00:26:11:26 - 00:26:39:26

Marie Mallare 1

I would like to thank SFGovtv.org, SFNewsfeed.us and Matt Gonzalez's reader. Thank you to my audio engineer and editor Javarre Henry. On behalf of my colleagues at the Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice at SAC State University, thanking you for tuning in to our podcast Building Justice. I'm Dr. Marie Mallare with San Francisco Public Defender Mano Raju

00:26:40:08 - 00:26:50:09

Marie Mallare 1

We hope our ongoing conversations spark understandings, empathy and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all.