



SPOTLIGHTS

Marlén Cortez Morris: Reflections On Hispanic Heritage Month

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I am a Litigation Partner in the Chicago office focusing in the area of Franchising and Distribution.

Growing up in a small rural town of Guanajuato, Mexico, I never imagined the life I am fortunate to have now—thanks to my parents, who courageously made the treacherous journey in pursuit of the American Dream.

Just 8 years old at the time, I soon noticed that people treated my family and me differently. It was not unusual for kids to call me racial slurs at school or for adults to be condescending to my parents because we were Mexican immigrants who didn't speak English. A quick learner, I heard but did not understand why others mistreated my parents—my heroes. They labored under difficult conditions in factory jobs to provide a better life for my siblings and me.

From my pain grew a dream to join a profession that fights for justice and equality for all. I was 9 when one day after school, my mom asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. "A lawyer," I said. Looking back, I wonder how I came to decide that law was my path, at that age. I did not know any lawyers, and certainly none that looked like me. But something in me ignited after being treated like we did not belong; as if we were somehow not equal. My mom assured me I could do it too: "mija, el que persevera, alcanza" (Translation: "My daughter, she who perseveres, will achieve.") And so, I have.

Raised in South Chicago, I am a product of its public schools. I have worked from age 16 on to afford college and law school, with the help of several scholarships I secured. As the first in my family to achieve higher

education, I had to overcome a steep learning curve – culturally and linguistically – and racial inequalities.

Some of these inequities persist to this day. Latinos continue to be severely underrepresented in the legal profession. Only about 5 percent of lawyers are Hispanic and less than 2 percent of those are women. I want to change that. I have been working to sustain the pipeline of future Latinx legal leaders through mentorship, raising awareness and sharing career advice (in partnership with the Hispanic National Bar Association and Hispanic Lawyers Association of Illinois), and facilitating scholarships and networking opportunities for Latinx law students through my work on the Hispanic Lawyers Scholarship Fund of Illinois' board. I also helped endow my law school's first scholarship for Latinx law students.

As a Mexican immigrant, I am also proud to help fight for human rights protections and access to justice for all immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers as a pro bono attorney and member of the Junior Leadership Board of the National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC).

One of my proudest moments was being recognized as “Alumnus of the Year” by my law school’s Latino/a Law Students Association in 2018, surrounded by loved ones, including my mom, siblings, and children. To be able to honor their sacrifice, and for my young siblings and children to see a room full of talented Latinos, who looked like them, it was profound.