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Inspiring the next generation

A LATINA LAWYER'S PERSPECTIVE ON BECOMING A TRIAL LAWYER
AND THE IMPORTANCE OF DEI

Once upon a time, there was a girl with big dreams. From a young age, her heart burned with ambition, and her mind overflowed with imagination. She lived on a ranch; her parents were the groundkeepers for the property owners so there weren't other kids (besides her siblings) to play with; she was often left to her own imagination; she loved retreating to her little treehouse, a special place her dad built just for her. It wasn't fancy; it was made from leftover plywood and it sat on a floor of dirt, but to her, it was perfect.

Inside, she had a small desk, a chalkboard, and a couple of old chairs. Her dolls and stuffed animals were her loyal audience. Her audience sat quietly as she made up stories, recited poems, and let her imagination run free. Sometimes, she pretended to be their teacher, giving lessons like she was in charge of her own little school. But her favorite thing to do was stand in her treehouse and imagine herself in a big courtroom, speaking confidently, her voice strong as she fought for justice. In those moments, her dreams felt so real,

yet deep down, a part of her believed they were out of reach, just a dream that would never become reality.

Her family was her foundation. Her parents worked tirelessly, sacrificing endlessly to give her and her siblings a chance at a better life. They taught her the value of resilience, the meaning of hard work, and how to stand tall in the face of adversity. She watched her mother juggle countless responsibilities with grace and her father tackle challenges with quiet determination. Their strength became her compass, pushing her

forward. But there was a constant struggle with her heart and mind. She felt a deep responsibility to do more, to be more, but in her heart, she doubted herself, convinced she didn't have the tools or any possibility of one day becoming a lawyer. You see, ever since she was a little girl, she often said, "I want to be a lawyer."

She worked hard, always feeling like she had something to prove. She pursued college, not because she fully understood why, but because a high school teacher once told her it was what all kids should do. She graduated and landed a great job. Life seemed to be on track, until the company she worked for shut down. What she didn't realize at the time was that she carried a heavy burden, one she hadn't yet spoken about. Back in college, she had dared to imagine herself becoming a lawyer. She even started taking steps toward making it a reality. But not everyone believed in her. One day, sitting in a college counselor's office, she shared her dream. The counselor looked at her and said, "You should pick another career. Being a lawyer isn't for you." The words cut deep, and she let them take root. For a long time, she believed them.

A dream meant for others

Suddenly, she was back to square one, searching for a new path. Her dream was always in the back of her mind, and as time went on, she convinced herself that being a lawyer wasn't for someone like her, someone with her background. That dream was meant for other people, not her. But destiny had a different plan. She soon found herself working at a law firm. "What a dream!" she thought. Along the way, someone special came into her life, a mentor who truly saw her potential. This mentor reminded her that her dream was not only possible but also necessary.

One day, he asked her a question that stopped her in her tracks: "Have you ever thought of being a lawyer?" Her heart raced. Did he really just ask that? And he was a lawyer; what was he seeing in her?

Her eyes brimmed with tears as the weight of the moment hit her. For the first time, someone believed in her, in the dream she had quietly carried for so long. Her voice caught in her throat. Stay composed, she told herself. Can he tell I'm tearing up? She took a deep breath, willing herself to speak. "Have I ever!" she finally said, her words filled with a mix of relief and excitement. For the first time, she felt seen, and a spark of hope reignited in her heart.

After years of hard work and dedication, she became an attorney, a Latina trial lawyer in a field where women like her were rare. Every time she stepped into a courtroom, she carried a deep sense of purpose. She wasn't just there to advocate for her clients; she was there to inspire others, especially young Latinas, to believe in themselves and their power to make a difference. She knew it wasn't easy to balance it all. As women, she had learned, there are so many roles to play: daughter, sister, friend, partner, professional. But no matter how heavy the load, she carried it with pride. Her goal wasn't just to succeed, but to lift others as she climbed.

And so, the girl with big dreams became a woman who made those dreams come true. She stood tall, not just as a lawyer, but as a symbol of hope for every young Latina who wondered if the impossible was within reach.

Professional journey and challenges

As a first-generation, Mexican American trial lawyer, I know firsthand the struggles and challenges that come with pursuing a legal career. I also know the challenges of stepping outside societal norms and what our culture teaches us we are supposed to be: family oriented, family focused, working inside the home. But times have changed, and fortunately, I had parents who supported my dreams. The path to becoming a lawyer is never easy, but for women like me, it often feels like we're blazing a trail with every step. These challenges aren't just about facing barriers in the courtroom, they're deeply rooted in

cultural norms that can make the journey even more daunting.

Yet, it's precisely because of these obstacles that I'm so passionate about inspiring the next generation. I've walked this path, and I want to show others, especially Latinas, that with hard work, faith, and the right support, they too can achieve their dreams. While my focus is on uplifting Latinas, because I deeply wish I had someone like me to guide me while I was growing up, I believe everyone, regardless of background, deserves encouragement to dream bigger and reach higher. Just as I aim to stand as a symbol of hope and possibility, I strive to be a mentor for anyone who needs support on their journey.

Every step of my journey, from overcoming doubts to establishing my own law firm, has been about breaking down the barriers I once believed were insurmountable. And now, I'm here to tell you that it's not just possible; it's inevitable.

With over 18 years of experience in employment law and nine years as a practicing attorney in both employment and personal-injury law, I have navigated a challenging field as a Latina, first-generation attorney. My journey has been shaped by the guidance of supportive mentors, a community of lawyers through the Consumer Attorneys Association of Los Angeles (CAALA), and a strong faith that helped me break barriers. These experiences have taught me the importance of perseverance and the value of representation, both of which have been central to my career and personal mission.

Role and impact in CAALA

My involvement with CAALA extends beyond being a member of the board, as I had the honor of serving as the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) chair in 2023 and 2024. This experience was deeply personal and eye-opening, because it strengthened my understanding of how vital representation and mentorship are in

driving change. Leading the DEI Committee was an honor, giving me and my colleagues a platform to influence initiatives that challenge systematic inequities and foster inclusivity within the legal community. From working with the judiciary on educational programs, to fostering relationships with affiliated bar associations and minority bar associations, to initiating programs that placed us out in the community with the hopes that we'd inspire the next generation, having an active DEI committee is essential. It ensures that the profession evolves to better reflect and serve the diverse communities that seek justice.

"If you can see it, you can be it"

One of our most meaningful initiatives was the "If You Can See It, You Can Be It" program, which strives to provide youth from underrepresented backgrounds with role models who share similar experiences and struggles. The program's goal was simple but profound: to show children that their dreams are within reach, no matter where they come from.

At one school visit, I encountered a group of young girls who left an indelible mark on me. After sharing my journey, they approached me with a question that was both simple and complex: "Is it possible to have a family and a career?" In that moment, I saw their curiosity, their hope, and their internal struggle with the same cultural expectations I had faced growing up. As I've stated, in the Mexican American culture, family often comes first, a beautiful value but one that can sometimes inadvertently limit individual aspirations. By asking that question, these girls were expressing a desire to break free from the stereotypes that might otherwise hold them back.

I assured them that it is absolutely possible to have both a fulfilling career and a loving family. More importantly, I could see in their eyes that my presence

alone was enough to plant the seed of possibility. I felt that these girls saw themselves in me, a Latina lawyer who had faced and overcome similar challenges, and it gave them permission to dream beyond what they thought was possible.

I would encourage everyone, to participate in these types of programs, they are personally fulfilling, but most importantly, life-changing for many youth.

Tools to take away and inspire change

From my journey and work in DEI, here are three tools and approaches that others can use to navigate challenges or to foster inclusivity and inspire others:

1. **Mentorship and representation:** Seek out mentors who can guide you through challenges and, when possible, be that mentor for someone else. Representation matters. By sharing your story, you can provide others with a roadmap and the belief that their dreams are achievable.
2. **Advocate for DEI programs:** Whether at your workplace or within professional organizations, champion initiatives that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion. These programs create opportunities for underrepresented individuals and pave the way for systemic change.
3. **Empower the next generation:** Take time to engage with young people in your community. Programs like "If You Can See It, You Can Be It" are powerful examples of how role models can inspire youth to envision themselves in roles they once thought were unattainable. Even small interactions can have a lasting impact.

The bigger picture

Through programs like these, we're not just inspiring the youth to dream, we're showing them that their dreams are attainable. Serving as chair of the DEI Committee for two consecutive years allowed me to work alongside passionate

colleagues who are committed to fostering equity within the legal profession. Together, we developed programs and initiatives that not only promote diversity but also create lasting change.

The "If You Can See It, You Can Be It" program also gave me the chance to connect with the community on a deeper level. At one school, the students asked when we would be coming back, a simple question that spoke volumes about the program's impact. It wasn't just a one-time interaction; it was the beginning of a relationship, a bridge between where they are now and where they want to be.

For me, that's the ultimate reward: knowing that the next generation will have fewer barriers to break and more opportunities to seize because they've seen what's possible. And in doing so, we're shaping a future where the legal profession reflects the diversity of the communities it serves.

In the end, my journey as a Latina trial lawyer is about more than just personal success. It's about breaking barriers, lifting others up, and showing that with resilience, faith, and the right support, dreams can become reality. Whether it's through my work in the courtroom or my mentorship to the next generation, I am committed to making a lasting impact on my community and beyond. I strive to be a voice for those who need it, a mentor for those who seek guidance, and a reminder that anything is possible when you believe in yourself.

Griselda Rodriguez received her B.S. from California State University, Northridge and earned her J.D. from Glendale University College of Law. She is a 2016 graduate of CAALA's Plaintiff Trial Academy and is an active board member. Ms. Rodriguez established her law firm, Servin Rodriguez Law, in 2020. Her practice primarily focuses on representing plaintiffs in single-plaintiff employment actions and personal-injury matters. www.servinrodriguez.com. 