

HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH

Determined to be a lawyer

Bethzaida Sanabria-Vega, a Springfield attorney, was born in Puerto Rico. The oldest of nine children, she was raised in Westfield where she attended St. Mary Elementary School and St. Mary High School. In 1993, she graduated from Boston College with a degree in English and received her juris doctorate from the University of Connecticut School of Law in 1996. She began her legal career that same year as an assistant district attorney in the Hampden County Office of District Attorney William Bennett. She worked there four years and then opened her own law practice in 2000, specializing in real estate transactions, criminal defense and personal injury. She recently responded to questions from Newspaper in Education editor Anne-Gerard Flynn about her upbringing and career.

Q. What elements in your background helped you to set college as your goal?

A. Ever since I was in the fifth grade, I wanted to be a lawyer, thanks to the "Perry Mason" reruns. You could say that subconsciously it was since the second grade when I started defending myself (in Spanish) with the U.S. Constitution. I would get teased at school by the older kids that I was in America and should be speaking English. I would tell them I had freedom of speech, and could speak any language I wanted. Of course, I know now that the Constitution's freedom of speech does not refer to the language you speak — but it worked!

Q. How supportive were your parents?

A. My parents were very supportive. My mom had graduated high school, had always wanted to go to college, but got married instead. A year later I was born. My dad never graduated high school, but he got his graduate equivalency diploma. They both worked very hard to maintain their family, but they wanted us to do more.

Q. How well did high school prepare you for college? Were there any obstacles you had to overcome?

A. My high school was very small. It prepared me for college insofar as the academic, but not with the social. I attended a fairly large university, and was overwhelmed at first.

There are always obstacles, most teachers were very supportive of me and my goals. I did have that one teacher who put me down for no other reason than that is just how she always was with me. Was she racist or prejudiced, I have no idea, she was just never nice to me.

Q. What discrimination or issues of fitting in did you face growing up? How did you handle them?



Staff photo by DON TREEGER

Springfield Attorney Bethzaida Sanabria-Vega in her Main Street office.

A. Growing up I spoke Spanish at home and English at school. As a child in elementary school, it was tough at times. I remember the special reading classes I attended for six years. I saw other students come and go, and I was still there. I used those classes to improve my English speaking and writing skills.

I was stuck in two worlds. In Westfield, I was Puerto Rican, but in Puerto Rico, I was *la gringa* (the American one). I never felt like I fit in either "world."

Q. What were some of the challenges in college you had to overcome?

A. Some of the challenges that I overcame are the same most young adults face — getting to know who you are and what your role is in the world. I was very active in the minority groups on campus.

Q. Why a career in law?

A. I knew I wanted to be able to help people, and felt this was the best career for me.

Q. How tough was law school? Did you encounter any mentors along the way? Any discrimination?

A. Law school, like any school, had its tough times. You are touching subjects that you never knew existed, while others were just common sense. Many of my professors were my mentors. As far as discrimination, I'm sure there was, but by then I just didn't care. I wasn't there for anyone but myself and my family.

Q. What lessons have you learned from your heritage?

A. Respect for others is the most important lesson I learned from my heritage. Unfortunately, respect is lacking in much of today's society.

Q. How did you become an assistant district attorney?

A. When I graduated from law school I sent my resume out to numerous offices, but they all wanted someone with experience. I heard through the grapevine that the district attorney's office was hiring so I sent in my resume. The district attorney himself called me in for an interview. A week later I was hired! At first I was in the arraignment session, requesting bail on the defendants that came in. After about a month I had my first trial! It was incredible, this is exactly what I was dreaming to do.

Q. What kind of law do you practice now?

A. After almost four years in the district attorney's office, I opened my own practice. It has now been seven years that I have had my own practice. I currently work on real estate (purchases, sales, refinance) and criminal law. It seems like an odd combination, but I love both aspects. There is nothing like helping people get the home of their dreams, and helping them maneuver the criminal justice system.

Q. What are you most proud of in your life?

A. I am most proud of my family. I have two beautiful children and a very supportive husband. Without my family, my work would be meaningless. My children come to work with me, and my husband Alex is my office manager. There are times when I look back and cannot believe how far I have come. It goes to show you that whatever you put your mind to do, it will get done, no matter how many people tell you otherwise.