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// BY MICHAEL TODD

Cristina Perez calls herself the "ultimate America success story." She watched her father go from educated Colombian émigré to American janitor, and eventually to surgeon. Inspired by her parents' passion for hard work, Ms. Perez and her husband built a high-profile immigration law firm in Southern California, and her skill and renown saw her tapped to preside over the local show *La Corte Del Pueblo*. Her success there led to four seasons with Telemundo's highly rated *La Corte de Familia*, and on Sept. 11 of this year she debuted an English-language version called *Cristina's Court*, syndicated by Fox's Twentieth Television. Already a public speaker, columnist, and radio host, September saw her add author to the list with publication of *Living by Los Dichos: Advice from a Mother to Daughter*.

Why did you go into the law in the first place?

My dad always told me, "Make sure you have a career that you have a love and a passion for. If you have a passion for what you do, you will be good at it and you can contribute somehow to that area." ... My mom always said, "I always knew you were going to be a lawyer. As a child you always defended everybody." In the Spanish culture, she said I was the "abogado de los pobres" ... always defending somebody.

Immigration law seems to reflect your own background. But why not pursue something more lucrative?

Going back to law school, nobody ever practiced immigration. It wasn't a glamorous field. Everybody wanted to be a corporate lawyer, a bankruptcy lawyer, or an entertainment lawyer.

For me, I remember meeting my first boss after law school, and I felt so connected to immigration law because of my parents, because of their story... My practice concentrates on professionals, people with college degrees, investors, actors, and entertainers.

We don't think of Shakira as an immigrant, but those people need visas, those people need green cards.

Why did you leave private practice for the media?

For me it was an

excellent way of expressing the law and educating people in the law through a little entertainment and a little light sense that basically allows me to tell people about how wonderful our [Hispanic] community is.

What is the status of Hispanics in the legal profession?

I think that slowly but surely we're coming out more. I would like to see more Latino professionals out there, but I do think that we have gotten to a point where we are much more visible.

Did you ever want to be a "real" judge?

It's not that I don't want to, but I love the area of law that I practice. As an officer of the court, my job is to basically find the truth, and that's what judges do on a daily basis. I've just sort of let myself grow within my practice.

There are a lot of English-language courtroom shows. Why enter that crowded space?

Court was somewhere where I thought, "What a perfect place to continue educating and to continue entertaining." People always say, "My God, Cristina, you're crossing over." And I say to people, "I'm glad, I've been crossing over for all of my life." I do that all the time. I am Latina, I am American, I live it every day. It's who I am.

What is the role of language in America right now?

I think it's extremely important that anyone who calls America their home learns the English language, learns and respects the traditions of this incredible country... Having said that, because America has had that open door policy, has had that tolerance for people coming from other parts of the world, we must recognize that people come here from different cultures, and it's OK to maintain their culture and, in particular, their language.

Where do you see immigration policy going in the U.S.?

I would hope that we reach a very comprehensive immigration reform that recognizes contributions and efforts of people who are here working in the United States and meets all of our security issues. We have to find a way to meet both sides. For us to ignore it I think would be a mistake – the issue is not going to go away.

What have been your most rewarding experience and most dreadful experience?

Most rewarding experience of my life has been watching my parents be proud of the success of their children. When I gave them a copy of my book, the look on my father's face was the ultimate acknowledgement of a job well done. I can't say I've really had a dreadful experience, except that sometimes I want to do so much for people and sometimes I can't. That's very frustrating for me.

What dicho (saying) has been most influential in your own life?

Oh, Lord! I think it must be, "El buen juez, por su casa empieza," which means that one who would be a good judge must start at home. □

