



Leader for All

New Bar President Jessica Sanchez



hose aspiring to positions of leadership and service might consider emulating Jessica Sanchez's

childhood goal: ninja.

Today, Sanchez is a successful lawyer and the newest President of the State Bar of Arizona. But when she was 5 or 6, she didn't yet know that some heroes wear business suits, and her heart was set on a life of leaping and espionage.

Sanchez, now 42, says her younger self didn't realize ninjas were assassins. "I just thought it was cool how they jumped and hid and did all kinds of cool things. I remember telling my dad, 'Dad, I want to be a ninja.'"

For the education law attorney, that memory offers multiple lessons: in parenting, in mentoring, in learning, and in hard work.

"My dad could've told me that was ridiculous or explained nicely why that's not a good idea. Instead, he took me outside, put a cinder block on the ground and a cinder block in each hand, and said, 'Jump up and down on this cinder block with weights in your hands. You'll build your legs.'"

Her dad asked why ninja was her aspiration, and she replied, "I want to jump high onto housetops."

Thanks to mentors like her parents, Sanchez has leaped higher and higher.

"My parents never said no. They never put limits on me. Growing up in a Latino household, my dad very much could have put some stereotypes on me that he didn't. No dream was stupid. My dad taught me how to fight and defend myself. My mom taught me to stand up for myself in words and principles. I have two amazing parents and have been so extremely blessed to have them and my two sisters in my life."

"If I ever had an idea for something I

wanted to do, my dad was like, 'Okay, how are you going to do it? Do it.'"

With a smile, Sanchez says that her dad often would add, "When are you going to be governor?"

These and other experiences taught Sanchez the power of positive support and mentoring, lessons she's carried into her professional life.

Mary Murguia is the Chief Judge of the Ninth Circuit and recalls first meeting Sanchez at a program Murguia launched years ago to support Latina lawyers and judges. What struck her then and today about the young attorney was her positive attitude.

"She's delightful," says Murguia. "She is upbeat and a problem solver."

Murguia was the first Latina to serve on the District of Arizona bench and is the first Latina Chief Judge of any circuit. That experience lends a special resonance to her praise of Sanchez, who is the first Latina President of the State Bar of Arizona.

"I credit what a great lawyer Jessica is. But to reach this level, it takes much more. She is a person of service. She cares a lot about the state, and she has shown her commitment to Arizona."

"I couldn't be more proud and grateful to have someone become president who cares so much for lawyers and those who benefit from them.

Murguia recalls Sanchez's years-long service as a leader in Los Abogados, Arizona's Hispanic Bar Association. That began when Sanchez was a law student and president of the Chicano Latino Law Student Association. Today, she is a former Los Abogados President and still serves on its Foundation board.

"She has distinguished herself in the Latino community, but she's a uniter and a consensus-builder. She'll be a president for all."

Another legal pioneer agrees. Ernest Calderón was the State Bar's first Latino president—and its first president of color—serving in that role in 2002-2003. He says Sanchez's presidency was "a long time coming and very well deserved."

"She is a high-energy person who has the ability to work with many people with diverse opinions, and to do it in a non-confrontational way."

As the integrated bar faces opposition locally and nationally, Calderón says, Sanchez's skill set is "right for the times—a lot of honey rather than vinegar."

"Jessica is going to have to hold us together," he says, calling it "almost a Lincoln-esque challenge. But her personality fits the challenge we face."

What was founded as a book club by then-district court Judge Murguia in the 1990s has grown into the robust multistate Latina Mentoring Project today. Originally, there were fewer than a dozen Latina lawyers, and in 2000, she expanded it to a brunch in her home to accommodate the increasing Latina lawyer population. She hosted the brunch for several years until attorney Mina Méndez started hosting it around 2004.

"When I retired," says Méndez, "I had more time, and that's when it developed into a more formal mentoring program with two events per year." That's about when Judge Murguia—whom Méndez dubs "our original fearless Latina leader"—suggested the name "The Latina Mentoring Project." It now has about 350 members, mentors and mentees across seven states.

Méndez speaks fondly about Jessica Sanchez—and looks forward to handing the LMP leadership reins to Sanchez and Maricopa County Superior Court Judge Ashley Halvorson. Méndez is a former commissioner and chairs the Arizona Board of

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Executive Clemency. She calls Sanchez “the rare person who can bring people together. She is a very good communicator, super-organized, empathetic and thoughtful.”

She also praises Sanchez and Halvorson for courage beyond their years, mentioning instances when they stood up for the right thing against opposition—lessons young lawyers should take to heart.

She says Sanchez, who started as a mentee, has mentored dozens of young Latinas. That is a great fit. Citing Sanchez’s success as a lawyer, volunteer leader and mother of a young boy, Méndez calls her “one of those rare people who is capable of achieving balance.”

Balance is a growing concern for the profession, and so Sanchez’s focus in the coming presidential year will be “the whole attorney, the whole community.” The new president cites “disturbing data about how unhealthy lawyers are as a profession” and says her number-one focus will be on the whole attorney. For her, though, this goes beyond substance abuse and mental health.

“How do we draw in the community more?” Sanchez asks. “How do we integrate our new legal professionals into the mix of addressing our access to justice problem? For me, it’s: How do we make ourselves better? How do we improve the community as a whole?”

Related to that community health, she says, diversity, inclusion and equity initiatives must play a part. “To the extent there are underlying barriers to fulfillment and to feeling fully a part of the community, we’ll address those.”

Judge Ashley Halvorson says she’s benefited from Sanchez’s mentoring—and organization skills. They met when Sanchez was the outgoing Los Abogados Secretary and she welcomed Ashley, her successor in the role. Today, she looks forward to co-managing the Latina Mentoring Project with a woman she calls a mentor.

“Jessica is an amazing leader, and I follow in her footsteps. I’ve tried to model my way of being a leader on hers.”

Halvorson recalls a time when Sanchez proposed expanding a successful Los Abogados scholarship program for law students. She felt the pipeline for lawyers of color had to start much earlier and suggested it be broadened to serve college students. Inev-

itably, cost questions arose—which Sanchez met by offering to raise the funds.

“That vision highlights her commitment to our profession and to diversity.” The result, Halvorson says, is a successful and measurable program aiding 10 to 15 students per year.

“That would not have happened without Jessica’s courage, vision and ability to execute. It’s an example of how she operates.”

And Sanchez is easy to work with and inspiring to whatever team she collaborates with. “She is goal-focused, energetic and incredibly reliable.”

“It’s no surprise Jessica has become Bar President. She’s amazingly organized and able to go from idea phase to execution phase. She’s courageous and not afraid to move an idea forward.”

Sanchez describes her process in a similar way.

“I prefer to listen more than I talk. I prefer to make data-driven decisions. I like to set measurable benchmarks. I like to stick to the strategic plan. It’s important to make sure everybody’s heard at the table, and then we make the best decision we can. I hate poor decisions to linger.”

With Sanchez, the perfect is the enemy of the good: “I’d rather make a decision and then modify and adjust.”

For Sanchez, the “whole person” includes a focus on the physical, a lesson that’s important to her family and, she hopes, to busy lawyers.

“Aquatics is a big part of my life,” she says. “I was a swimmer, and that was my career for about 11 years. That’s how I paid for college. I had an academic scholarship, but this also helped cover the rest of it. While I was at NAU, I worked as a lifeguard, taught courses, and even got to teach P.E. courses, including water aerobics.”

“Because of my certifications, the recreation center invited me to be part of their risk management team. I would train everybody in CPR and first aid, develop emergency action plans, and run drills to make sure everybody knew what to do in an emergency.”

Out of the pool, Sanchez also has taught Okinawan martial arts. And it surprises no one when she says, “My dad was my first *sensei*!” She was a black belt when she arrived at NAU, where she went on to earn

her second-degree black belt.

A few years ago, she realized “I needed to take charge of my physical health in a more intentional manner. I wasn’t like super unhealthy, but being an attorney, it’s always easy to prioritize work.

“It was before I turned 40, and I said, ‘This needs to be a part of my life and my family’s life.’”

She found a personal trainer who is a former mixed martial arts fighter. Also on-brand: “He incorporates kickboxing into all our workouts.” Today, her 8-year-old son Jacob also boxes and is on the swim team. Rounding out the well-rounded family, her husband does weight-training, and has coached Jacob’s flag football team.

At work, Sanchez enjoys the ever-changing variety of educational law issues her school district clients face. Her mom and a sister are or have been teachers, so this comes naturally to her. And the job has grown more challenging amidst a pandemic that closed schools and heightened public attitudes about health responses. Sanchez calls it “a nonstop rollercoaster” and has deep sympathy for educators’ plight.

“Being an educator—and I mean that from all angles, from the bus driver, to the teacher, to the principal, to the cafeteria worker, to the nurse—I don’t think it’s ever been harder to be in education than it is today. There’s a lot of misplaced trust. I’m surrounded by people who are just trying to do what’s right by kids, which makes it very easy to be their attorney. It is very sad to see how under attack the system is for any number of reasons.”

“I feel like in general we’re just an angrier society, and a lot of that tends to be directed at public education.”

At Udall Shumway, the head of the Education Law Group, Denise Lowell-Britt, calls Sanchez “an amazing lawyer and an amazing person. She is a leader, and super community-minded.”

“She is able to guide clients through challenging times.” Lowell-Britt says that those Sanchez meets this coming year will find she’s “warm, friendly, open-minded—and intent on making a difference.”

Former boss Kim Clark agrees. Today Clark is Senior Attorney for Reproductive Rights, Health and Justice at Legal Voice, but when she was the General Counsel for

the Scottsdale School District, she gave Sanchez her first legal job as an intern—and as an attorney when Sanchez graduated.

“I was impressed by her technical skill but mainly with her EQ,” Clark says, referring to emotional intelligence. She praises her ability to work with and influence people.

“She’s a real person,” Clark says, “a down-to-earth normal person with really strong values who cares about those around her. Voices like Jessica’s are exactly what we need in the profession—and on the bench. She’s one of my favorite people in the world.”

Sanchez’s colleagues praise her ascension to the top job.

Longtime attorney and Los Abogados leader Danny Ortega says she has “a brilliant mind and a curious soul. She represents all of us who are driven by service.”

“Her talents are being able to talk to the issues without talking down to people. She is a hard worker who is committed to the community and its representation. Jessica is a person who wants to find common ground. She’s already had a tremendous impact on our community, and she wants to know how to include everyone.”

Fellow Bar Governor Doreen McPaul met Sanchez when they were in the same BLI class and says Sanchez is “always on top of things, very organized and very diligent in her approach.” McPaul is the Navajo Nation Attorney General and the Nation’s Chief Legal Officer, and she oversees the lawyers and staff of the Nation’s Department of Justice. As such, she understands the skills needed to advance big initiatives.

“Jessica is always respectful in her communications and can take a position without undermining others.”

“She’s just good people. She has a good heart and is about public service and giving back. She’s a collaborator and consensus-builder.”

Attorney Margarita Silva recalls that 20-plus years ago, Jessica was invited to be part of their golf foursome—and that cemented multiple friendships.

Silva, Joanne Garcia and Virginia Herrera-Gonzales found the young woman a complete pleasure, on and off the links. Silva says that many dip their toe into community or professional service, but “she was one of

Jessica Sanchez

is a partner at Udall Shumway PLC, where she practices education law.

Previous legal experience:

In-house counsel for the Scottsdale Unified School District; General Counsel for the Tempe School Districts: Tempe Union High School District, Tempe Elementary School District and Kyrene Elementary School District

Education:

Northern Arizona University, 2002; Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law at ASU, 2006

Honors:

Bar Leadership Institute 2013 graduate; Los Abogados 2013 Emerging Leader Award; 2017 “Top Lawyer Under 40” Award

State Bar of Arizona service:

Executive Officer, 2019-present; Board of Governors, 2017-present, 2019-2020 Strategic Planning Committee Chair; 2019-2020 Finance Committee Co-Chair; Appointments Committee, 2013-2019 (2018-2019 Chair)

Professional Involvement:

Los Abogados 2016 President, Board of Directors, 2007-2017; Hispanic National Bar Association Deputy President for Region XIV; HNBA Program Mentor; Latina Mentoring Project

Family: Husband Eddie, son Jacob, age 8

the first I can recall who has stuck with it for so long, through multiple career steps.”

She recalls Sanchez’s first attendance at a Los Abogados retreat, when she was a law student representative. She offered her report during the student portion of the agenda, but then did more.

“Usually students just sit and listen, but Jessica was very active. She had questions about other topics, including a civil rights question. She wanted to know how the students could get more involved—‘what can we do?’”

“She was all in.”

Herrera-Gonzales agrees, praising her willingness to do the hard work. “Once Jessica came around, she never left.”

“This is history in the making. If anyone was going to be the first Latina President, it had to be Jessica for her tenacity, drive and leadership. I love her dearly, and we are all so fortunate to have her in our community

and our Bar.”

Retired Judge Margarita Bernal says, “She is a really wonderful young woman, and forceful when she needs to be.” Bernal is pleased Sanchez’s focus will be the whole lawyer: “If we ignore that, we do lawyers a disservice.”

“I’m thrilled beyond words that Jessica is becoming president. We all need to support and celebrate her.”

Today Brian Furuya is a Court of Appeals Judge, but he worked closely with Sanchez when he was Bar President. He has great confidence in her tenure.

He says she once chaired the Appointments Committee, one of the Bar’s most challenging assignments. The committee reviews applicants and makes recommendations to the Board of Governors for appointment to commissions and other bodies. Appointments are competitive, the committee reviews much information, and the chair is the point of the spear that presents the results to the board.

“It can be a thankless job,” Furuya says, “and it can be terrifying to present to those 29 people.”

Once the deeply considered recommendations are shared, it’s not uncommon for board members to strongly suggest changes or deviations from the committee’s work.

“Inevitably, lots of lawyers essentially want to redo everything from scratch.” Or, he says, a lawyer will offer the name of “someone I know personally.”

“That’s how business used to be done, and important values like diversity can be sacrificed on the altar of someone getting ‘the last say’—unless a committee chair is brave.”

Sanchez has that fearlessness, Furuya says, and has convinced many people to honor the process.

“It takes some guts to stare down that board and say, ‘We have confidence in our process, and the results should be honored.’”

“Jessica is an incredibly selfless person. It’s in her DNA to put others first. She is committed to the notion of public good, of doing something bigger than yourself.”

Judge Furuya concludes, “She is one of the kindest people I’ve ever met and one of the most genuine. When she asks for your opinion, she really wants it.”

“It’s an essential quality in a leader.” 