



Hon. Pedro A. Delgado-Hernández

Judge, U.S. District Court for the District of Puerto Rico

by Sarika J. Angulo



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On a sunny October day, Judge Pedro A. Delgado-Hernández graciously acceded to an interview for a profile article to be published in *The Federal Lawyer*. As the day of the meeting arrived, I was courteously escorted to the judges' conference room in the U.S. District Court for the District of Puerto Rico by one of his senior law clerks, Liza Rios. After making me feel welcomed and advising me that the judge would be right with me, she exited the room. As I sat down at the conference table and surveyed the space, which was named in honor of late U.S. District Judge Salvador E. Casellas, I instantly noticed that, as in any other corner of the courthouse, the present honored the past.

To my left, I was greeted by a picture of the first Puerto Rican federal judge to ever sit in the District of Puerto Rico: Hon. Clemente Ruiz Nazario. And to my right, by a prominent trilogy of pictures of past judicial compositions of the court. Straight ahead a wall of windows overlooking the well-manicured lawn caught my attention next. A ray of light showcased a large-scale wooden gavel laying atop a mahogany cabinet mounted below the windows. Affixed to its handle, two small brass plaques honor the court's two most recent chief judges: the immediate past chief judge, Hon. Aida Delgado, who served from 2011 to 2018, and the current chief judge, Hon. Gustavo A. Gelpi. Next to the gavel lay a real-sized silver shovel in commemoration of the recent remodeling of the courthouse. In the center of the room sat a beautifully polished conference table with room for 12 people, where I supposed the judges routinely convene. Simply put, the room radiated a solemn, yet inviting ambience.

Soon after, Judge Delgado-Hernández arrived. He epitomized gravitas: impeccably dressed, collected, deliberate, and very respectful. Born on Oct. 1, 1956, in San Juan, Puerto Rico, he is the eldest of two sons born to working parents. His father, also a former federal public servant, worked for the Customs Service at the U.S. Department of the Treasury, while his mother worked as a social worker. But, once the children were born, his mother decided to dedicate her life to what Delgado-Hernández affably and proudly described as the “social work of raising a family.”



Asked if it had always been his desire to pursue a career in law, he recounted that when he started his undergraduate studies at the Rio Piedras Campus of the University of Puerto Rico, his eyes were initially set on a medical degree. But, as he began taking undergraduate courses in humanities and social sciences, his curiosity and interest in those topics grew exponentially. He remembered fondly taking a humanities course with professor Arturo Echevarria Ferrari, who was an authority on the literary works of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. Delgado-Hernández recalled how stimulating it was when Echevarria opened up the floodgates of intellectual discourse to discuss engrossing themes. Among Judge Delgado's favorites were Classical Greek literature and the literature of other periods since both provide the contextual background necessary to illustrate how literary works either adopt or challenge the zeitgeist prevalent during the time they were produced and how the outcome can impact social and cultural norms.

Delgado-Hernández also reminisced about his days taking social science courses with professor José Candelaria. He vividly remembered class discussions on social contract theory, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Particularly, he was amazed at how these lectures “opened a window

to another world he knew nothing about,” while at the same time expanding his then-known views on society at large. Although elective courses in humanities subjects captivated his interest, he graduated in 1979 with a Bachelor of Science in general biology. In that same year, he also enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserve.

Deciding to become a lawyer instead of a medical doctor, Delgado-Hernández enrolled at the University of Puerto Rico School of Law, which, as instantly confirmed, was a sagacious decision. Since day one, he traversed the treacherous seas of the Socratic method and legal reasoning like a skillful sailor. Not only did his intellectual acumen earn him a coveted spot on law review, but he also snagged a position as a research assistant to highly regarded professor Herminio M. Brau del Toro, all while maintaining a competitive grade point average throughout law school. His hard work parlayed into a magna cum laude Juris Doctor degree and the Manuel Resumil Aragunde Award for scoring the highest grade point average in criminal law. Then, after successfully surviving the grueling months of studying for the bar exam and being admitted to practice law in Puerto Rico, Judge Delgado-Hernández accepted a position as law clerk to a rotating roster of judges at the Institute of Judicial Studies within the Courts Administration Office of Puerto Rico. There, he honed in on his legal research and writing skills as his duties centered mostly on researching and drafting memoranda of law to assist judges on a host of different state law issues. It did not take long before Hon. Juan Torruella took notice and offered him a position as a term law clerk at the U.S. District Court for the District of Puerto Rico. Little did Delgado-Hernández know that his trial court clerkship would also lead to an appellate clerkship when Judge Torruella was elevated to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit, taking Delgado-Hernández along with him on this new and exciting ride.

Upon finishing his appellate clerkship, Delgado-Hernández entered private practice as an associate attorney at a prominent law firm in San Juan’s financial district. After years of proven track record, he ascended the proverbial ladder and became a partner in the Labor and Employment Law Department. A few years later, however, yearning to become a public servant, he accepted a nomination by then Gov. Pedro Roselló to become solicitor general of Puerto Rico, a position he only held for two years because he was soon appointed and confirmed as an appellate judge for the Circuit Court of Appeals of Puerto Rico. After his years of public service, he returned to his former law firm, firmly reestablishing himself as a well-regarded trial lawyer. Then, on an auspicious spring day in 2013, he received a telephone call from Pedro Pierluisi who at the time was Puerto Rico’s resident commissioner. Pierluisi had recommended Delgado-Hernández, under the auspices of President Barack Obama, as a nominee for an Article III judgeship for the District of Puerto Rico. Upon accepting his nomination and successfully completing a thorough and lengthy vetting process, Judge Delgado-

Hernández was unanimously confirmed by the U.S. Senate in March 2014.

When asked about his experience on the bench thus far and about the people who have helped him along the way to become the successful professional that he is today, many peers made the list, but Judge Torruella topped it. Expressing his admiration and respect for Judge Torruella, Judge Delgado-Hernández described him as a distinguished jurist and public servant, while underscoring that his life experience and uncanny ability to relate to ordinary citizens make him also a remarkable human being on a personal level. In fact, years of mentorship and sustained friendship with Torruella have imbued in Delgado-Hernández the importance of being inquisitive, thorough, and “to leave no stone unturned,” which he strives to put into practice every day.

Similarly recognizing the positive impact the daily interactions with his current courthouse colleagues have had on him, Judge Delgado-Hernández also shared words of praise for them and what he’s learned from each. From Judge Carmen Cerezo and Judge Daniel Domínguez, it’s the discerned importance they both show exercising the vital muscle of patience on a daily basis; to allow the parties to express themselves and to be open to be persuaded. From Judge Jay García Gregory, it’s the significance he places on human dignity. From Judge Francisco Besosa and Judge José Fusté, it’s the recognition and importance of docket management. From Judge Aida Delgado, it’s that all cases, regardless of whether they fall within the straightforward or complex category, are important. The same degree of significance needs to be afforded to each case evenhandedly while remaining cognizant of and sensible to the competing interests between a criminal and a civil docket. From Judge Juan Pérez-Giménez, it’s the commitment to public service. And from Chief Judge Gustavo Gelpí, a self-confessed Spider-Man fan, it’s the wisdom that “With great power comes great responsibility” and that it is incumbent on the judiciary to wield the power the U.S. Constitution bestows upon the judicial branch responsibly.

But if just one lesson had to be distilled, the most important tenet he has learned from all his colleagues—as well as from his time on the bench—is to fairly and impartially apply the law to each case so as to advance one of the pillars of democracy: the equal and fair administration of justice to all. And, in his view, therein lies the importance of the Federal Bar Association (FBA) and its core mission of strengthening the federal legal system by

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promoting effective legal practice. These values go to the heart of improving caseflow while reducing unnecessary cost and delays to the parties, which inexorably translate into the effective administration of justice.

In extolling the work of the FBA, Judge Delgado-Hernández also commended

After getting to know Judge Delgado-Hernández a bit better, I was curious to learn what his definition of success was. So I asked. And he replied: “Achieving your dreams. Being open to changing plans and reformulating strategies if necessary, all in furtherance of achieving those dreams. Realizing that success is not only attaining your goals, but enjoying the process.”

the organization for creating positive and indelible impressions on the personal and professional lives of its members. As a member of the FBA himself since 2009, Delgado-Hernández recognized that from seasoned to recently admitted lawyers or law students, its members always stand to benefit. Through the different activities the FBA hosts throughout the year, such as brown bag lunches, seminars, and social events, its members are provided a unique opportunity to foster professional relationships among colleagues, many of which develop into valuable networking opportunities or—even better—into long-lasting friendships. In this vein, I asked him to share any advice if one is to excel in his

or her law career, to which he responded: “Work hard day in and day out. Know your craft. Behave ethically and civilly. Enjoy the journey.”

Wondering about any easy-to-apply practical tips that

may assist one in enjoying the journey, I inquired next about any pastimes that have contributed to him having an enjoyable journey. His answers were simple, yet profound. Staying physically active and spending time with his wife, twin daughters, and grandson, while eagerly awaiting on the arrival of his second grandson lead the list. Curling up with a good book, such as Gabriel García Márquez’s literary masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, followed by re-watching good films, such like the 1957 classic courtroom drama “Twelve Angry Men,” run a close second.

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In a parallel universe with alternate realities where I did not have the benefit of enjoying a conversation with Judge Delgado-Hernández, I would have asked him if he believed he had attained success. But after our meeting in this parallel, real-life universe, that question felt redundant. It was glaringly obvious to me—or to anyone who may have the opportunity of speaking with him—that Judge Delgado-Hernández has made his own way by going the distance, and in doing so, he has not only achieved success, but also excelled on any metric used. ☺

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