



by Liza M. Rios-Morales and Hector L. Ramos-Vega

## Hon. Camille L. Vélez-Rivé

### U.S. Magistrate Judge, District of Puerto Rico

American author Washington Irving wrote: “There is in every true woman’s heart a spark of heavenly fire, which lies dormant in the broad daylight of prosperity; but which kindles up, and beams and blazes in the dark hour of adversity.” That kind of fire was ignited in 2004, when U.S. Magistrate Judge Camille L. Vélez-Rivé of the District of Puerto Rico faced her darkest hour. Not even a year had passed after her appointment to the bench and, while still trying to learn the ropes of her new job, her two-year old daughter was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. But that fire in her heart, her determination, the strength and courage that only a mother can summon in protection of her child, coupled with her professionalism and dedication to her job, and the unconditional support of her family, allowed Judge Vélez-Rivé to come out unscathed after such a terrible ordeal. We are happy to report that her daughter went into remission almost seven years ago and is doing extremely well. It is not surprising, however, that such an experience had an incredible impact on the way that Vélez-Rivé sees herself as a woman, as a mother, and, as she herself admits, as a judge.

Camille Lizette Vélez-Rivé was born on Feb. 5, 1968, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. She is the daughter of Dr. Enrique Vélez-García, a San Juan-based hematologist/oncologist, and Nora Rivé-Mora, a housewife. The Judge has two siblings, her brother Enrique “Quiquito” and her twin sister Lizette Camille. Judge Vélez-Rivé attended the Academia Perpetuo Socorro in Miramar, Puerto Rico, where she graduated with honors in 1986. In 1989, she obtained a B.A. with honors from Washington University in St. Louis. In June 1993, Judge Vélez-Rivé received her J.D. *magna cum laude* from the University of Puerto Rico School of Law.

While still in law school, Judge Vélez-Rivé worked as a law clerk for several law firms in San Juan. She was also a



student law clerk in the summer of 1991 to the Hon. Carmen Consuelo Cerezo, U.S. District Judge for the District of Puerto Rico. Upon graduating from law school, she clerked for the Hon. Francisco Rebollo-López, former associate justice of the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico. After working in private practice for three years, Judge Vélez-Rivé’s journey as a public servant began in 1998. She was hired by the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Puerto Rico, where she worked—first in the appellate division (criminal) and then in the civil division—until she was appointed to the bench in March 2004. Last year, Judge Vélez-Rivé was reappointed by the active District Judges in the District of Puerto Rico to a second eight-year term as a U.S. Magistrate Judge.

Impressive as they are, Judge Vélez-Rivé’s academic and

*Liza M. Rios-Morales is a former law clerk to Judge Vélez-Rivé. She previously served as managing corporate counsel for T-Mobile USA and was a senior associate at O’Neill & Borges, LLC. She clerked for Hon. Francisco A. Besosa, U.S. district judge for the District of Puerto Rico, and Hon. Efraín E. Rivera Pérez, associate justice of the Puerto Rico Supreme Court. Hector L. Ramos-Vega is a supervisory assistant federal public defender for the District of Puerto Rico. He previously clerked for Hon. Justo Arenas, Chief U.S. Magistrate Judge for the District of Puerto Rico. He is on the Editorial Board of The Federal Lawyer and the Board of Directors of the Hon. Raymond L. Acosta Puerto Rico Chapter of the FBA.*





Judge Vélez-Rivé and her twin sister, Lizette.

professional credentials are not her highest accomplishments in life; her family and her daughter are. Additionally, being a federal judicial officer is a big part of her life. But it does not define her. It is Judge Vélez-Rivé's personal traits and characteristics—including her humility, compassion, respect for others, and regard for family values—that provide an idea of what she really is about. To try to understand her judicial philosophy, one perhaps might read her judicial opinions or attend one of her lectures. To really know her as a person, all that is needed is to bump into her at the hallway of the federal courthouse, share a table with her at the cafeteria during lunch (which not all judges do), or simply engage with her in casual conversation at a Federal Bar Association (FBA) function. The people consulted for this profile invariably had only praises for Judge Vélez-Rivé; she is well-regarded and respected by her fellow judicial officers, by litigants who appear before her, and by court personnel.

This profile would not be complete without the input of the most important person in her life: her daughter María Elisa, now 11 years old. "Mom is the best mother and person in the world, even when she sometimes has to scold me if I misbehave," she notes. Every time María Elisa reads her mother's name in the newspaper, she feels a great deal of pride knowing that her mother has a job that helps Puerto Rico be a better place. Also, for as long as she can remember, María Elisa has had to get used to duty week; her mom meeting with agents and prosecutors at all hours of the day and night and even during weekends. It has become part of María Elisa's routine. When María Elisa was old enough, Judge Vélez-Rivé made it a point to take her to court one day so she could understand what mommy does. She was able to observe several criminal hearings and the process of defendants who were detained and handcuffed by the deputy U.S. marshals. She was able to observe defense attorneys and prosecutors arguing for and against the release of defendants, while some were granted bail and others ordered detained. This is an experience that Judge Vélez-Rivé wanted María Elisa to have, not only to understand what her mother does, but also for the lesson that such an experience imparts.

María Elisa is well aware that when she was diagnosed

with leukemia, Judge Vélez-Rivé was always there for her. María Elisa explains: "She was so strong during that time, and ever since, she has supported me and been at my side, even if it meant having to postpone other important things."

Her daughter revealed to the authors of this judicial profile a couple of the Judge's best-kept secrets. First, that she is a die-hard fan of music from the 1980s and is quite the in-car singer. Apparently, her rendition of Bruno Mars' "Treasure" is simply outstanding. According to María Elisa, it's always a party in the car. Finally, María Elisa remembers when her mom and her aunt Lizette received the results of the test that showed they are identical twins. "We were all together on a trip and they started jumping, dancing, and screaming of happiness; I thought they were never going to stop."

Lizette is, without question, the person who has known Judge Vélez-Rivé the longest: 46 years plus the nine months they spent together in their mother's womb. She is an attorney, having attended law school and graduating at the same time as Judge Vélez-Rivé. As identical twins, Lizette has resigned herself to correct people every time they confuse her for her sister and call her "Judge" or "Your Honor." When asked to describe her sister, Lizette used the following list of adjectives: jovial, sensible, just, humble, sincere, structured, and organized. "She accomplishes everything she sets her mind to." The aspect of Judge Vélez-Rivé's character that her sister admires most, however, is her dedication to her daughter. "Since I am not a mother myself, that is what I admire most about her: her dedication and ability to comply with both of her most important responsibilities in life: her professional commitment to her job and her role as a mother."

The proudest moment of her sister has definitely been when she was appointed as a U.S. Magistrate Judge. Lizette remembers having been very happy with the news of her sister's appointment, but that it really hit her when she attended the formal investiture ceremony; that day, Lizette finally realized her sister's great accomplishment. The investiture ceremony was not without its amusing "identical-twin-sisters" moments. Lizette remembers having arrived first at the ceremony and everybody having come to her to say hello and to congratulate her, believing she was Judge Vélez-Rivé. Since it was so many people, Lizette limited herself to say "hello" and "thank you" to everyone who approached her. Lizette explained to Judge Vélez-Rivé that she (the Judge) had been extensively greeted. Another anecdote that her sister remembers from the investiture is that she was a speaker and later saw a newspaper article about Judge Vélez-Rivé, but the photograph was of Lizette during her speech. Lizette has similarly had her share of moments where she has freaked out the court security officers and courtroom personnel by being on the wrong side of the bench.

On a more serious tone, Lizette wants readers of *The Federal Lawyer* to know that as a judge, her sister has a very high sense of justice. According to her, Judge Vélez-Rivé is not one to be influenced by external pressures; she decides cases based on the law and the evidence before her and rules based on her conscience. "She is woman of law and order, period. She will make

sure justice is served. She is transparent; in fact, her face often reveals what she is thinking. What you see is what you get.” Finally, Lizette commented on her sister’s humility. “She likes to fly below the radar. When forced to say what her profession is, she limits herself to say ‘lawyer.’” Needless to say, Lizette is her biggest fan.

On the professional side, it is important to note that Judge Vélez-Rivé is praised by both her fellow judges and the litigants that appear before her. U.S. District Judge and FBA National President Gustavo Gelpí, who has known Judge Vélez-Rivé since they were in elementary school together, has fond memories of her. “I was in her brother’s class, and Camille and her identical twin Lizette were three classes behind me with my brother. We would thus coincide at all school-related activities and during the weekends at the Caribe Hilton beach club (where the FBA National Convention was held). She and her sister were always inseparable (and still are). Until we all left for college, our group would spend the entire day swimming, jumping off the pier, and at the game room playing pinball, air hockey, and ping pong. It was a very special time growing up in a crime-free and very friendly social environment.”

When Judge Vélez-Rivé was selected to fill her position, Judge Gelpí was then also a Magistrate Judge. “At the time, I was the youngest judicial officer by far, and thus, it was nice having someone from my same generation joining me.” Since then, both have continued to be great friends now on the bench. Additionally, Judge Gelpí vouches that Judge Vélez-Rivé is an excellent settlement judge and mediator. She is also a jurist to whom parties frequently give their consent. Adds Judge Gelpí: “Due to our court’s overwhelming criminal docket—top in the nation—we always encourage the parties to consent. This shows the enormous trust litigants place on her. More so, she settles more than a fair deal of my civil cases.”

Likewise, Justo Arenas, retired U.S. Magistrate Judge, remembers when “Camille” came aboard in early 2004 and how happy he and his fellow Magistrate Judges were at her appointment since they were a bit stressed at the caseload. “She had practiced before us as a federal prosecutor for about four years (in hundreds of cases) and knew her job well. Then Chief Judge Laffitte created the position of Chief U.S. Magistrate Judge during Tony’s (Magistrate Judge Antonio Castellanos (Ret.)) tenure, and when I met with Camille as a peer for the first time, she called me Chief, and I called her Junior, and the titles remained until my retirement.” Arenas also noted that even when she was no longer junior, the title stayed, although she gladly surrendered the duties of taking minutes at our staff meetings to U.S. Magistrate Judge Marcos Lopez. Judge Arenas commented: “What stands out most in my memory is her extreme sense of duty, including her insistence in managing her duty week even under extreme personal hardship and always with that disarming Cheshire grin.”

Justice Roberto Feliberti of the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico has known Judge Vélez-Rivé and Lizette for more than 20 years. They all met in law school. He knew the Judge not only as a very good student, but as a great person as well. During his time as a litigator in private practice, Feliberti appeared before the Judge in several civil cases. “She was always well

prepared for the cases and treated the parties fairly and respectfully.” He has watched and admired the Judge’s career from afar during the past few years and can honestly state that she is the perfect example of what a judge should be: hard working, studious, responsible, fair, and just; always in control of her courtroom and her cases, just to mention a few.

Fellow U.S. Magistrate Judge Marcos E. López coincided with Judge Vélez-Rivé in high school, in private practice, and at the U.S. Attorney’s Office. However, it was not until they both were appointed to the bench that Judge López had an opportunity to interact more than briefly with Judge Vélez-Rivé. Judge López commented on the tenacity and character that Judge Vélez-Rivé demonstrated during the illness of her daughter and how she was able to persevere and balance her professional obligations against what he describes as an incredible challenge. Judge López mentioned that Vélez-Rivé is “always wired.” He is amazed as to how fast she replies to

e-mails and messages. He is also very grateful for Judge Vélez-Rivé’s willingness to assist her fellow Magistrate Judges when they have personal or emergency situations.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Silvia Carreño-Coll also remembers Judge Vélez-Rivé since the time they both worked at the U.S. Attorney’s Office. Judge Carreño-Coll remembers Vélez-Rivé as a very diligent and professional attorney and always well-prepared. Before her appointment to the bench, Judge Carreño-Coll had the opportunity to appear before Judge Vélez-Rivé. “She always conducted the proceedings with the formality they deserve and her rulings were always fair and timely.” She also recalls a very special moment during her own investiture ceremony. Judge Vélez-Rivé allowed her to borrow some words that her father had dedicated to her—a blessing of sorts. This moved Judge Carreño-Coll because she did not have her father physically present at her ceremony.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Max Pérez has had the experience of litigating criminal cases before Judge Vélez-Rivé, both as a defense attorney and, now, as a prosecutor. He appreciates when the Judge from time to time calls him to the bench to let him know that she acknowledges the effort and the argument but that she has to rule against him. Pérez believes her best attribute is that she listens to both sides, is open to being persuaded, and is not afraid to change her mind if needed. “What more can litigants ask from a Judge?”

Héctor Ramírez, assistant U.S. attorney and chief of the civil division, has a similar impression of Judge Vélez-Rivé. “She listens and gives you the opportunity to be heard, makes the effort to get it right, and you leave her courtroom satisfied that the right decision was made, even if unfavorable to you.” Ramírez appreciates how respectful and cordial Judge Vélez-

**“What stands out most in my memory is her extreme sense of duty, including her insistence in managing her duty week even under extreme personal hardship and always with that disarming Cheshire grin.”**

**—Hon. Justo Arenas (ret.)**



Rivé is in court and outside. She is firm, but just in her rulings.

Similarly, First Assistant Federal Public Defender Víctor González, who has appeared before Judge Vélez-Rivé in criminal cases since her appointment, considers the Judge to have been very consistent throughout her career. According to González, the Judge is a very independent judicial officer and strives to use her judicial discretion in the interest of justice. “She is not afraid to correct mistakes if she has made any, or if she has been misled into making them.” As to the latter, González recalls having been at the receiving end of a firm but respectful scolding by Judge Vélez-Rivé. In a long bail hearing for a juvenile case, González made (not intentionally) a statement of law that was later confirmed by the Judge to be incorrect. “That is what makes her a good judge; she might trust you, but she will always check.” Federal Public Defender Héctor Guzmán added that he always comes to Judge Vélez-Rivé for feedback regarding the performance of his attorneys. “One of the reasons I come to her for feedback in particular is because I have found the feedback to be both accurate and helpful and I can use it to make adjustments in the office to perform better and help our clients. She does not sugarcoat her comments; I can expect an honest, forthright evaluation from her.”

José “Chemi” Gaztambide, a criminal defense attorney, has known Judge Vélez-Rivé for more than 10 years. He has always found her to be an honest, responsible and intelligent person. Chemi litigated cases against Judge Vélez-Rivé while she was at the U.S. Attorney’s Office and has appeared before her on numerous occasions since her appointment as a Magistrate Judge. His impression of her is that she is very professional and fair; and that she possesses the experience, talent, and maturity to be an excellent Article III Judge. Something that impresses Chemi about the Judge is that she has never allowed her prior position as a prosecutor to influence her decisions from the bench. He remembers that when she was appointed a Magistrate Judge, some members of the criminal defense bar thought she would somehow be inclined to favor the government. “They could not have been more wrong,” Chemi commented.

Another federal court litigant that has appeared before Judge Vélez-Rivé in both civil and criminal cases is Laura Maldonado. She provided an anecdote that really shows the Judge’s temperament. Maldonado was a member of a husband/wife team of attorneys representing the plaintiff in a civil jury trial presided over by the Judge. Because of a calendar conflict, Maldonado had to excuse herself from the meeting to mark exhibits. In her absence, her husband stipulated that certain documents would not be used. He never informed Maldonado of the stipulation reached. As she got up to cross-examine the main defendant, she began to inquire into the documents that her husband had stipulated would not be used. Understandably, objections and angry screams filled the courtroom, and immediately Judge Vélez-Rivé called for a sidebar, where for the first time Maldonado found out about the stipulation. “I angrily requested a brief recess; the Judge uttered some words that my anger did not permit me to catch and flew off her chair into the safety of her chambers. Ten minutes later, the Judge calls all to cham-

bers and cracks up into a laughter/relief/tearful expression telling the husband-lawyer: ‘I am so relieved that you are still alive and without bruising as far as we can see.’”

Judge Vélez-Rivé’s talent as a skilled mediator was also praised by Attorney Manuel San Juan. He remembers one complex environmental tort case in which the Judge was instrumental in helping to settle. The case had been going on for seven years and had been vigorously litigated through many proceedings, including an injunction hearing and a jury trial, with several bellwether trials still to come. The Judge met with the parties for countless hours to discuss each of the individual plaintiffs’ claims. “She was always well prepared, listened carefully to both sides, and offered practical solutions to the numerous impasses that arose. She worked tirelessly and kept us at the table until we finally settled the case. We couldn’t have done it without her.”

Not only judges and litigants, but court personnel as well attest to the professional and personal attributes of Judge Vélez-Rivé. Deputy Chief U.S. Probation Officer Carlos Cancio expressed his gratitude and admiration for the Judge on behalf of the Probation Department. Cancio noted that Judge Vélez-Rivé has always been open in criminal cases to new alternatives to detention and has carefully considered the department’s assessment of the cases as well as the alternatives presented. “Her understanding of the rules of detention presumptions and different release options has contributed to Probation’s effective allocation of resources, always balancing the need to protect the community and risk of non-appearance on the part of the defendants,” Cancio added. According to Cancio, the Judge is always very accommodating to the needs of the probation officers and very flexible. On several occasions, she has even moved with her staff to conduct hearings on-site when raids involving many defendants make it difficult to handle all hearings in court, thereby promoting efficiency.

In addition, it is important to note that Judge Vélez-Rivé has a demonstrated and deep commitment to the formation of future legal professionals and the development of the legal profession in Puerto Rico. She is frequently a lecturer, speaker, and panelist in numerous continuing legal education courses. Guzmán, for instance, appreciates Judge Vélez-Rivé’s assistance in training Criminal Justice Act attorneys, some of whom are relatively new to the panel. According to Guzmán, the Judge’s participation has helped raised the level and quality of the legal practice in criminal cases. She also has taken time out of her busy schedule to appear at the different law schools in Puerto Rico to speak on a variety of subjects. For instance, Professor Richard Graffam has invited the Judge to his federal jurisdiction class at the Interamerican University of Puerto Rico School of Law, where the students have benefited greatly from her participation and perspective. Similarly, former Assistant U.S. Attorney José Pizarro, who teaches at the Pontifical Catholic University of Puerto Rico School of Law, is very grateful for the assistance the Judge provided to the students of his federal civil practice class. The students were impressed with her knowledge of the subject and her down-to-earth approach.

Finally, it must be mentioned that Judge Vélez-Rivé has

been an ardent supporter of the FBA and, in particular, the Puerto Rico chapter. A longstanding member herself, even before her appointment as a Magistrate Judge, Judge Vélez-Rivé is always available to assist the Puerto Rico chapter. She has participated as a resource in FBA-sponsored seminars, brown bag lunches, induction ceremonies, and other functions for many years. Judge Vélez-Rivé has also been, since 2007, a FBA foundation fellow.

It is simply amazing all that Judge Vélez-Rivé has been able to accomplish in the face of a challenge as big as deal-

ing with the life-threatening disease of her daughter. The District of Puerto Rico family is fortunate to have such a hardworking and fair judicial officer the same way her daughter is fortunate to have such a humble, loving, and dedicated mother. Her commitment to equal justice under the law and to the community of Puerto Rico is only surpassed by her dedication and love for her family.

Judge, in this moment of prosperity, let the fire in your heart remain aflame. ☺