



Judicial Profile

by Board Members of the Hon. Raymond L. Acosta Puerto Rico Chapter of the FBA

Hon. Roberto Feliberti Associate Justice, Puerto Rico Supreme Court

From San Juan to West Lafayette, with a brief stop in Australia and another longer one at Roosevelt Roads, to Fajardo (his adoptive hometown), and back to San Juan, the Hon. Roberto Feliberti has not followed the conventional road to the steps of the Puerto Rico Supreme Court in Puerta de Tierra. His sense of duty—to answer the call of his family, nation, and island—has taken him down a unique road.

The second son of four children to Don Emiliano Feliberti and Doña Hilda Cintrón, Feliberti learned at a very early age the importance of duty, honor, and country. His circumstances and personal sense of duty made the young Roberto follow in his father's footsteps, a member of the Greatest Generation who served in the U.S. Navy.

In 1981, at the age of 18, Feliberti graduated from Academia Nuestra Señora de la Providencia (Our Lady of the Providence) in San Juan. He left the warm and tropical climate of Puerto Rico for the less mild temperatures of West Lafayette, Ind., and Purdue University to pursue a degree in science. He first thought engineering was his calling, but mathematics was his passion. A stellar student, Feliberti received a scholarship from the U.S. Navy, which required a minimum commitment of four years of active service after graduation. Because he had not participated in ROTC during his first two years at Purdue, he joined the Naval Science Institute, spending his sophomore and junior summers onboard a ship in the Indian Ocean. This allowed him to see the world at an early age, traveling to places like Australia and the Philippines.

Upon graduating in 1985 with a degree in mathematics, Feliberti was commissioned as a naval officer and joined active service. He returned to what was then Roosevelt Roads Naval Station, a base located in Ceiba, Puerto Rico. It was at Roosevelt Roads that then-Lieutenant



Feliberti first encountered what would become his life calling. After attending Naval Justice School, he began to work as a legal officer at the base. In that capacity, he was responsible for all administrative support in Captain's Masts (i.e., nonjudicial punishment) as well as pre- and post-court martial and administrative discharge proceedings. That experience made him realize that he would devote his professional career to the law. However, the end of that road was still undefined. Roosevelt Roads

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was not short of prominent Puerto Rican attorneys. While there, Feliberti would cross paths with the likes of former Chief U.S. Magistrate Judge Justo Arenas, former Assistant U.S. Attorney Jorge Arroyo, and former First Assistant Federal Public Defender Epifanio (Epi) Morales. He enrolled at the University of Puerto Rico School of Law, attending evening classes while fulfilling his commitment to the Navy.

During his last summer in law school, having completed his Navy obligation, Feliberti was preparing to work for former serviceman Iván Domínguez at the U.S. Attorney's Office in Puerto Rico. A chance meeting with Chief Magistrate Judge Arenas led to an unexpected change in plans and the opportunity to extern in federal court. This gave Feliberti his first glimpse of the judiciary and of the role he would have almost 20 years later.

Upon graduating with honors in 1991 and passing the bar exam with the second highest score (99.6 percent), Feliberti clerked for U.S. Magistrate Judge Roberto Schmidt-Monge and, subsequently, for U.S. District Judge Raymond L. Acosta, after whom the Puerto Rico Chapter of the FBA is named.

Aside from professional fulfillment, Feliberti's stint at the U.S. Courthouse would be marked by a key event: a chance meeting with Lizette Torres-Santiago. Upon returning to chambers after meeting Torres-Santiago, Feliberti told the judge's secretary that he had met the woman he was going to marry. The bold prediction proved true when the couple married a year later. (They have now been married for 19 years and have an 11-year-old daughter, Hazel Elizabeth).

Another young promising attorney entered the district court at roughly the same time: current U.S. District Judge Gustavo A. Gelpí, Jr. Feliberti and Gelpí, whom at the time was clerking for U.S. District Judge Juan M. Pérez-Giménez, formed a strong friendship, and their careers developed in parallel paths over many years.

Upon completing his clerkship, the young attorney joined the litigation practice group of Cancio, Nadal, Rivera & Díaz (CNRD). Like Feliberti, his friend and mentor at CNRD was a partner with a penchant for public service named Arturo Díaz-Angueira, a seasoned trial practitioner. Prior to joining the firm in 1980, he had been an assistant district attorney, a federal public defender and a U.S. magistrate judge. Feliberti skyrocketed through the ranks at the firm, becoming a capital member, and spent 16 years handling complex civil and commercial litigation matters at the trial and appellate levels, both in federal and state courts, all the while remaining an active member of the Puerto Rico Chapter of the Federal Bar Association.

Besides being a natural in the courtroom, Feliberti was always characterized by his civility and mild-mannered style during his years in private practice. Perhaps his training in the hard sciences and mathematics made then-attorney Feliberti enjoy the challenge of solving problems. So, in a very real way, the search for the right

answer to legal problems attracted him to a career as a judge. This was a goal that, true to the discretion that characterizes judges, was not worn on his sleeve.

After almost 20 years of cementing a reputation as a first-rate attorney, Feliberti received not only a call, but THE call. His caller ID flashed "blocked." On the other line was Gov. Luis Fortuño, who then, in his first year of his administration, submitted Feliberti's name to the Senate for its advice and consent on filling a seat on the Puerto Rico Court of Appeals.

Justice Feliberti could not be more professionally satisfied. Known for his precision and for being keenly aware that opinions should not overstate or unnecessarily belabor points, but rather consider and rule on what is before the court, Justice Feliberti would get another "blocked" call in 2011. This time, he was asked to fill a vacancy at the Puerto Rico Supreme Court.

On May 25, 2011, Justice Roberto Feliberti took his seat along with his eight brethren: Chief Justice Federico Hernández-Denton and Associate Justices Liana Fiol-Matta, Anabelle Rodríguez-Rodríguez, Rafael L. Martínez-Torres, Mildred G. Pabón-Charneco, Erick Kolthoff-Caraballo, Edgardo Rivera-García, and Luis F. Estrella-Martínez. On the occasion of his investiture, Justice Feliberti quoted the words of former Puerto Rico Supreme Court Justice Baltasar Corrada del Río:

"I am a man of consensus, understanding and communication. I will exhaust all efforts to seek harmony in our pronouncements and decisions, recognizing that litigants, lawyers, judges, legal scholars and the people expect from us clarity and definition in the guidance of Puerto Rican law and to resolve disputes that come before us. ... Consensus allows for the strengthening of the rule of law and its effective implementation. ... I will wear this robe with deep personal and professional pride, knowing my mission to provide justice to all alike and my responsibility to honor a great institution of the people of Puerto Rico: the Puerto Rico Supreme Court."¹

Since taking his seat on the bench, Justice Feliberti has been true to those words and has not forgotten the

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role that his federal practice played in his professional development. After 20 years, he remains a member of the Federal Bar Association and of the chapter that carries the name of one of his first mentors. He is also a fellow of the Foundation of the Federal Bar Association. As a member and fellow, Justice Feliberti regularly attends and actively participates in chapter activities. He took the oath of the 2011–2012 chapter board and has participated in the installment of student divisions alongside federal judges, such as his colleague and friend Judge Gelpí, who joined the bench a few years before Justice Feliberti. Justice Feliberti's law clerk Vilma Vilá was his co-clerk during their days with Judge Acosta.

A very wise man once said that what a man values in his life can be gauged by what he keeps in his office. During a visit to his chambers on the new wing of the Puerto Rico Supreme Court, one gets a sense of what is important to Justice Feliberti. He keeps numerous pictures of his loving wife and daughter. Above his desk are the framed letters from Gov. Fortuño submitting Justice Feliberti's name to the Senate for its consideration for the seats he would occupy at the Appeals and Supreme Courts. A diehard fan of the New Orleans Saints and of fellow Boilermaker Drew Brees, Justice Feliberti keeps a considerable collection of sports memorabilia and pictures of Felix Trinidad and Roberto Clemente. Most prominently, perhaps, are two artistic renditions of the flags of the United States and Puerto Rico as well as a photograph of a younger Roberto Feliberti donning his Navy Service Dress Whites.

Ultimately, Roberto Feliberti is a man who has answered different calls. Most importantly, the call to be a family man; a proud American who, like his father, answered the call to serve his nation alongside his fellow Americans; and the call to serve Puerto Rico as a judge. Yet, out of all the places that he's been, Justice Feliberti says he is most comfortable in his adoptive town of Fajardo, a beachfront town on the eastern part of the island, spending time with his wife, his daughter, and their dog, watching the sun rise in the east. ☉

Endnotes

¹Remarks of Associate Justice Roberto Feliberti-Cintrón on the occasion of his investiture, 181 D.P.R. XVI-XVII (2011) (translation ours).