

NATALIA MORALES-ECHEVERRÍA

Hon. Aida M. Delgado-Colón Chief Judge, District of Puerto Rico

“Her impeccable record in public service and in the field of law has earned her a place amongst the most distinguished jurists and attorneys in Puerto Rico.”

—Hon. Luis Fortuño, Governor of Puerto Rico,
at the 2nd Session of the Confirmation Hearings
on Judge Delgado’s Federal Appointment held
on Feb. 7, 2006.

Hard worker, just, humanitarian, perfectionist and a role model – these are some of the words that describe the Honorable Aida Delgado-Colón, Chief Judge for the United States District Court for the District of Puerto Rico. Born in Lares, Puerto Rico on August 31, 1955, Chief Judge Delgado is the oldest of four children born of Luz Colón, a teacher, and José Antonio Delgado, owner of a small scale agro business and local farmer. Part of a close-knit family, Chief Judge Delgado learned early in life the importance of helping others. She remembers with pride when her father used to help other farmers with administrative work, like filling out the forms needed to receive certain government benefits. These documents were being taken, unnecessarily, to attorneys for completion. Even though the farmers could not afford the lawyers’ fees, they were still being charged. From that time, Chief Judge Delgado knew that she wanted to become a lawyer and help those in need of legal services.

She completed her primary and secondary schooling at a private Catholic school in her hometown. Throughout her school years, she took part in, and excelled at, school competitions and also engaged in voluntary community service. These experiences served as a foundation for her future personal and professional achievements, and helped her grow more conscious of the problems that plagued her community.

In 1977, she obtained her bachelor’s degree in Business Administration from the College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts of the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. After college, she entered law school at Pontifical Catholic



University in Ponce, Puerto Rico. She graduated from both institutions with honors. While studying for the bar exam, she attended a job interview at the Puerto Rico Department of Labor and Human Resources (DLHR). The round of job interviews started at 9:00 a.m., and by 4:00 p.m. she had the job.

In September 1980, she joined the Governor of Puerto Rico’s Advisory Council on Labor Policy at the DLHR as a legal investigator. Shortly thereafter, from 1981 until 1982, she became director of research and investigation. In August 1982, Chief Judge Delgado joined the federal government – becoming the first woman to work as assistant federal public defender for the District of Puerto Rico.

At the time, very few women had ventured into the federal criminal law practice. In fact, the hiring authority shared with her his concern in hiring a woman for the task. She realized that the task was not easy but, once again, accepted the challenge. She proved her boss wrong in a very short time. Three years later, the federal public defender had hired two other female attorneys. She was quickly promoted to first assistant federal public defender

and later served as the acting federal public defender for the District of Puerto Rico from 1991 to 1993. By then, she had opened the door for other female lawyers within the field of criminal litigation in Puerto Rico.

Chief Judge Delgado remembers her days at the public defender's office as "challenging and exciting, but most of all, a true learning experience, both professionally and personally." She learned about the strengths and weaknesses of human beings, the social consequences of poverty, and the consequences of a lack of education, unemployment and greed. Another significant lesson learned was that in criminal defense work, as in life, the concepts of failure and success – the notion of winning or losing a case – acquire a different dimension and meaning. She also learned to be a good listener and welcomed every opportunity to assist the public defender clients beyond the scope of her legal duties. One of her most rewarding experiences was when she was assigned to defend a young adult charged with drug trafficking. That individual later became a witness for the government in a case that, given its complexity, lasted several years before the court. While the case was pending, and upon Chief Judge Delgado's insistence and advice, this person completed his bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees. Today, he is a professor at a well-known university in the United States. This is one of the many experiences as a public defender that proved to Chief Judge Delgado the potential for rehabilitation in every person.

Chief Judge Delgado began her judicial career in 1993 by becoming the first female magistrate judge in the District of Puerto Rico. She was appointed to an eight-year term and re-appointed to a second term in 2001. She recalls with great satisfaction and humility that during her induction ceremony, the federal public defender, her former boss, asked to be a speaker. That day, he publicly recognized that women can perform quality criminal litigation work and predicted that, one day, she would become the second woman appointed to the federal bench in Puerto Rico. When that day materialized in 2006, her former supervisor, then 90 years old, was also one of the key speakers at her induction ceremony.

While a magistrate judge, she presided over numerous high-profile cases, including the case of *Teatro del 60*. *Teatro del 60*, which was her first civil trial, was a copyright infringement case regarding the production of the musical "The True Story of Pedro Navaja," shown in Puerto Rico and New York, based on the character of Pedro Navaja from the popular Rubén Blades song. The trial lasted 30 days. During those 30 days, Chief Judge Delgado came face to face with the lifelong dilemma of applying the law and doing justice in situations in which both objectives cannot be simultaneously met. At the

end of the case, her commitment to the rule of law remained firm.

Early on in her judicial career, she learned that no case is "too small or too simple." Many cases present social, economic and political considerations, and public scrutiny is at stake. The responsibility is huge and most of the time, the allies are few. Along these lines, she recalls the Vieques cases. Vieques is a small island off the main island of Puerto Rico. From the 1940s to 2003, the U.S. Navy performed military training, including bombing practice, on grounds it owned on the island. After an incident in 1999, where a civilian was accidentally killed in one of the bombings, Puerto Ricans from diverse political and religious beliefs united and protested against the target practices in Vieques. The protests most commonly took the form of occupation of military grounds, where some of the protesters camped out. The civil disobedience encampments on military grounds were eventually evacuated by U.S. Marshals and federal law enforcement agencies. Hundreds of protesters were arrested for trespassing on U.S. military territory. Even though the cases were legally straightforward, the social and political aspects, as well as the public scrutiny involved, proved to be difficult and demanding for Chief Judge Delgado. To date, she remembers the social, political and legal repercussions, and the adverse media coverage that resulted from those seemingly simple trespass cases.

During her tenure as a magistrate judge, she had over a 98 percent adoption rate by the District Court on both civil and criminal proceedings. From 1999 through 2003, she resolved over 60 percent of all criminal pre-trial matters and over 55 percent of all civil pre-trial matters from the total of matters assigned to the magistrate judges of the District Court. These matters ranged from pre-trial evidentiary hearings to civil trials on consent.

On October 25, 2005, Chief Judge Delgado was nominated by President George W. Bush to an Article III judgeship, recommended by the Puerto Rican at-large Congressional delegation and endorsed by then-Resident Commissioner and Republican National Committeeman, the Honorable Luis Fortuño, as well as Democratic National Committeeman and then-Puerto Rico Senate President Kenneth McClintock. Her nomination was also supported by the Puerto Rico House of Representatives, the Hispanic National Bar Association, and the Federal and American Bar Associations.

The process was hectic, accelerated and nerve-racking, but in the end very satisfactory. She was confirmed on unanimous consent by the U.S. Senate on March 6, 2006 and received her commission on March 17, 2006. As predicted by her former boss in 1993, Chief Judge Delgado became the second female on the Puerto Rico federal bench. In 2011,

she also became the second female to hold the position of chief judge for the District of Puerto Rico.

As chief judge, she has to balance both her caseload and the multitude of administrative tasks for which she is now responsible. Judge Delgado presides over a court with 10 district judges and four magistrate judges. Since she benefitted from having worked closely with her experienced predecessors, her goals are to preserve collegiality among fellow judges, promote professionalism among members of the bar, and maintain high public trust and confidence in the federal court. She also seeks to have the court become involved in more outreach programs to help society restore basic values, such as respect for human life, respect for human rights and respect for governmental institutions. To her, compromise, dedication and verticality are the key ingredients to becoming a successful professional. Along this line, she has promoted and remains supportive of pro bono and community outreach programs. Currently, along with personnel of the U.S. Probation Office, fellow judges and personnel of other federal agencies, task forces have been deployed to do community work at homes for the elderly, orphanages and community centers. Programs designed to prevent drug addiction, safe use of social media and counter cyber-bullying are being regularly carried out at private and public educational institutions.

Chief Judge Delgado has also been an active participant in court committees. For the past five years, she has been a member of the Court Administration and Case Management Committee for the Judicial Conference of the U.S. Courts, and an active supporter of the Judicial Reform Programs, through which the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S.

Department of State promote judicial reform in Central and South America.

In addition, Chief Judge Delgado has a passion for teaching. From 2002-2004, she taught as an adjunct professor of federal civil and criminal forensics practice at the Pontifical Catholic University of Puerto Rico School of Law. Describing it as one of the most rewarding experiences of her life, she believes that every judge and lawyer should intervene in and contribute to the education of future lawyers and the improvement of the legal profession. After all, to Chief Judge Delgado, lawyers are agents of social change who have responsibilities and obligations towards the community.

In her free time, Chief Judge Delgado enjoys gardening and the art of stained glass windows. She also has a passion for horses, traveling and reading. Going back to her formative years in her hometown, she enjoys spending time in the countryside, where she finds the solitude and tranquility needed to balance her hectic work life. Her success as a lawyer and judge are an example of her mantra in life: "If you really wish for something, with a clean heart and clean hands, it will come true." **TFL**

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