

# Cristina Pérez: Beyond the Bench

by Sylvia Mendoza



**F**airness and equality rank high on the lists of Judge Cristina Pérez, not only in her courtroom, but in living a life that matters. As the judge-actress of Fox Television’s *Cristina’s Court*, Pérez tempers her approach to litigants with a mix of iron-fist, no-nonsense, sage wisdom and motherly advice.

Born in New York, she has climbed the ladder to become a successful lawyer, television personality, radio host, entrepreneur, nationally-read author, wife and mother. All those facets of her life are intricately intertwined with her cultural identity and parents’ unwavering values, which she believes make her a better judge and person – and keep her on a path of integrity and purpose.

“I want to effect change in what I do. We have an obligation to each other and to ourselves to use our talents and strengths. It’s a privilege to be doing what we’re doing. It is

not just a job. It’s the core of who you are,” said Pérez.

The core runs deep and sure for Pérez.

There are other things that she takes to heart, strengthening her convictions. She wholeheartedly believes that America is a land of opportunity for immigrants, that the foundation of values her parents set out before her were her guideposts all along, that breaking stereotypes and setting the bar high for women and Latinos is a given. And of course, there’s the delicate balance of marriage, having a daughter and the wish for more children that drives her to be a good example and role model in her community.

The journey began at the University of California-Los Angeles, where Pérez earned two Bachelor of Arts degrees. She then attended Whittier Law School and earned a Juris Doctor degree. She co-founded Pérez González, a pro-

fessional law corporation. “Law is a passion of mine and always will be,” she said.

That passion led her to become the first female judge-actress to air on a nationally syndicated Spanish network series, with *La Corte del Pueblo (People’s Court)* and *La Corte de Familia*. She became the first television judge ever to cross over from Spanish- to English-language television.

*Cristina’s Court* features small-claims cases but focuses on conflicts and legal arguments between

celebrities, families, couples and others with relationships in turmoil, including friendships, business partnerships and co-workers. She has a tough persona, but tries to connect on a personal level by sharing her wisdom, background and moral beliefs with those who stand before her.

“I can’t judge others before I judge myself. I put myself in their shoes. What breaks my heart is when the litigants are family members – mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, siblings – fighting

over small amounts of money, like 50 dollars. These are the cases that affect me – because they have the potential of permanently splitting apart the family. In these situations, I have a responsibility to help put the family back together, using

gives her strength. “As women, we are hard on ourselves. We do what comes naturally, whether it’s the balancing ‘mom act’ with work or as a caregiver with our parents or involvement in our community. We ideally

greater than we are. Whether as immigrants or whether you are born and bred in America – no matter what your cultural identity – being true to yourself is a privilege and a gift. We have to use that fire in our souls and in our bellies to

Pérez is driven by the story of one immigrant in particular. She tells it like this: “Referring to America as ‘the land of possibility and potential,’ this man and his wife arrived from Colombia to the Bronx, N.Y., in 1963 to pursue his



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whatever lessons I can,” she said.

Her job is a unique opportunity to be part of the effort to help change a person’s life or a potentially destructive situation. It is a humbling experience, she said. “We are all the same as human beings at the end of the day, with no one person better than the other. That realization keeps me focused and makes me stronger,” said Pérez.

#### Cultural Identity

Knowing where she comes from and what her purpose is today also

want to be Mrs. Cleaver and Ms. CEO all at once. We need to drop the guilt trip and see what we have going for us.”

What we have going for us, she thinks, is our roots. It is her connection to and respect for her family that gives her strength to pursue her own dreams but to also think about her part in the bigger picture. Her parents’ work ethic and unwavering belief in the American dream made it clear that it was available to anyone willing to put forth the hard work and effort.

“Our culture is something

help each other, to uplift us as a group to influence public trends and policies, to help empower women, to be role models for younger generations,” said Pérez.

At the core of that cultural awareness is respecting differences, especially in relation to immigrants.

“Immigration has been the foundation of this incredible country. We must teach our children to celebrate diversity and to acknowledge that it is this diversity that empowers and drives us to succeed,” she said.

dream of becoming a surgeon and providing a better life for his family. The man withstood unspeakable discrimination and confronted obstacles, simply because he was an immigrant. While he was an educated man, he did not speak perfect English. As a result, his worth as a human being and a professional was devalued. Rather, he was judged alone on his looks and voice and was forced to take any type of employment that would support him and his family – from janitor to assembly-line factory worker. But he never complained. You

see, despite these hard times, he knew this incredible country would eventually open doors for him and his family. He was right. After 30 years of perseverance, hard work and overcoming many challenges, this man finally accomplished his goal. He became a top surgeon, earning top honors and recognition among his peers who once frowned upon him.

“This is the story of one American immigrant. But for me, this is the one that drives me through my life to succeed because this is the story of my father. It is my family’s legacy. His strength and passion resonate with me in everything I do. The greatest thing I learned from him is that all people are capable of overcoming obstacles and are worthy to achieve equally great things in this country.”

Pérez’s father’s story led her to her love of the law and to another passion – supporting the American Immigration Law Foundation’s Curriculum Center, based in Washington, D.C. The center promotes the value of what immigrants have brought to this country.

The overall mission of the center is to be a catalyst of change, starting in the classroom, said Claire Tesh, Curriculum Center manager. Teachers are trained throughout the United States to discuss and teach volatile topics, such as immigration, objectively and fairly within a structure of tolerance and an appreciation for diversity. Education is combined with valuable life lessons to inspire students to be culturally sensitive to others. Students learn about the historical and current perspectives of immigration to our nation, but also get an understanding of their own heritage.

“Cristina’s dedication and vision have inspired great programming at the center. Our center and Cristina believe in fundamental fair-

ness for all Americans and basic human rights,” said Tesh.

The Curriculum Center offers five interactive components: free one-day workshops offering lessons and materials to teachers to develop their own curriculum with grade-leveled, standards-based lesson plans; teacher fellowship awards to deserving teachers to create and implement innovative ways of introducing students to immigration and related topics; a creative-writing contest for fifth-graders with the theme, “Why I’m Glad America Is a Nation of Immigrants”; the Immigration Exhibit Hall, which curates exhibits, such as “America’s Heritage: A History of U.S. Immigration”; and the annual K-12 teacher’s symposium, “Appreciating America’s Heritage: Teaching Children About Immigration.”

Last year, when Pérez spoke at the Los Angeles Area Teacher Symposium at the Japanese American Community Center in Little Tokyo, Tesh learned that she was the daughter of immigrants and how that motivated her in many of her achievements. “Cristina is compassionate about exposing the truth about the benefits of immigration and dispelling the myths that media, hate groups and anti-immigration platforms cast by helping students think critically about the issue,” she said.

That is why Pérez believes in the power of the annual creative writing contest, for which thousands of fifth-graders from classrooms around the country write essays, poems and other pieces illuminating and humanizing the immigration experience. Winners get a variety of prizes, but they also attend a naturalization ceremony, where they see immigrants take the oath, becoming United States citizens. It can be a powerful lesson.

“This is my favorite project to dedicate time to. They write about

their ancestors and other immigrants who have left their homelands in search of a more promising future, and in their eyes, it becomes part of the ‘American’ narrative. We must take pride in our cultural identity, whatever that may be. I want children to know that the most valuable lessons and inspiration that you will gain in your lifetime will come from generations that precede you and from those who are different from you. We must spread this message nationally,” said Pérez.

### The Legacy

Pérez considers herself a go-getter, a feminist and a U.S. citizen with an equal opportunity relationship with her husband. She knows with total conviction that her success comes from her own smarts combined with how she was raised.

“We try so hard to be so successful that we compromise our identity and lose sight of who we are and what matters. I am 100 percent Latina and 100 percent American. I will not sacrifice either. Both make me a strong woman. I set an example for my daughter, who is watching every step I take.”

She turns to her own mother’s wisdom every day by reflecting on the *dichos* (proverbs) that were passed down to her. So important were they, she wrote a book about them, *Living by Los Dichos*.

“I have incredible parents. It is all about proudly embracing your roots. Staying true to your identity will guide you down the right track. My book is how I live,” said Pérez.

Perhaps that strong, secure sense of self has led her to become the role model she wants to be for her daughter. Named one of America’s 10 most inspirational women by *Siempre Mujer* magazine in 2007, she was also selected as “Woman of the Year” by California’s 43rd District. She was

honored as one of the Top 10 Latina Advocates for making the world a better place for women and Latino rights advocacy by the national magazine *Latino Leaders*. She has been a spokesperson for the Lawyer Referral and Information Service of Los Angeles County and chair of the National Association of Latina Leaders. She is recognized at the California Museum of History, Women and the Arts in Sacramento, Calif.

Pérez hopes her daughter finds the same kind of passion, whatever path she chooses. “I think she sees how we try to set an example of living a good, productive life. She knows I’m dedicated to the work ethic.”

But Pérez is dedicated to so much more.

“I look at my daughter’s face and think – ‘how much more successful than that can you get?’ I want to make sure she is an empowered human being in every way. If I can raise a person who possesses love, confidence, perseverance, strength of spirit, resourcefulness, a strong cultural identity, respect for others, dedication and passion for what she does – then I will have created a legacy.”

In the meantime, Pérez continues to live her filled-to-the-brim life with passion, never forgetting that she is surrounded by all that matters – her family, her values and her love of the law, fairness and equality.

“I absolutely live the American dream,” said Pérez.

