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Georgetown Alumna Captures Award for Pro Bono Lawyer of the Year

Yolanda Gallegos (LLM'89)

When it comes to legal philosophy, Yolanda Gallegos is a believer in the potent mixture of fire and ice.

Attorneys often hear personal testimony of inhumane and cruel treatment, Gallegos said. "One of the hardest things to do is to anesthetize yourself in order to function. If you do it too completely, then you lose the fire you need to be an advocate. You have to strike a balance," she said.

Gallegos was able to harness that power a year ago as a graduate fellow at the Law Center's Institute For Public Representation (IPR), winning kudos for her tenacity on behalf of immigrants. Gallegos' efforts were rewarded with the 1989 Pro Bono Lawyer of the Year award from the District of Columbia Bar Association.

"I think she did a tremendous job. She typifies the kind of work that graduate fellows at the Institute and graduate fellows in clinics in general can do," said Douglas Parker, IPR's director. "She typifies the best tradition of Georgetown," he added.

Quiet spoken, but utterly engaging, Gallegos exudes a warmth reinforced by an undercurrent of steel. During the course of a conversation about herself, she returns often to two words: perfectionism and passion.

"I wanted to do work where I could assist people—the poor and the voiceless—and I wanted to do it well," she said. Gallegos said the goal has always been "perfection and care and attention to details."

When she applied for the master's degree fellowship at IPR, the fit seemed tailor-made. The Institute represents immigrants and focuses energy on disability rights, consumer

and environmental law, civil rights and federal communications law.

The prime opportunity to showcase her legal skills came when a community group referred an El Salvadoran immigrant to IPR and Gallegos for help. Gallegos said the man was paid little or nothing for jobs he performed. The employer, she said, took advantage of the immigrant because he was poor and from a foreign country.

The immigrant described his ordeal while speaking in Spanish, Gallegos said. His voice was a monotone, absent any rage as he recounted the stories of how he was repeatedly mistreated for nine months. His employer paid him less than minimum wage for working long hours at a construction site, while requiring him to sleep in a trailer on-site with no heat, toilet or sinks and no locks to discourage intruders. He was also expected to act as night watchman.

Next, the same employer provided a job in a pool hall in the District of Columbia. The Salvadoran immigrant was responsible for maintenance and the job was contingent upon him living in the basement of the building and, again, being the lone security guard.

One day, a sewage pipe burst, releasing human waste, water and debris into the basement. The employer refused to fix the pipe for three weeks, forcing him to collect the mess in a bucket. When he finally balked at the living conditions and paltry pay, he was promptly fired, ordered out onto the street and was barred from retrieving his possessions. Because of that experience, the man says he suffers from chronic headaches, nausea, an eye condition, nose bleeds, a skin condition and other maladies.

Empathy Leads to Inspiration

The man was referred to Gallegos at IPR by the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN). This group was formed to help immigrants from El Salvador and other Central American countries who seek asylum here. CARECEN also helps with housing needs and advises immigrants who claim unfair labor tactics.

Gallegos was shocked and inspired by the story. She realized that his situation was probably not uncommon and that many El Salvadoran immigrants were likely trapped in manual labor jobs at illegal pay rates.

Taking the initiative, she and several workers at CARECEN drafted a model complaint that attorneys could use to bring a lawsuit alleging similar wage violations.

She and students researched applicable laws—finding 11 in all—that are either federal statutes or D.C. codes. Gallegos brought the suit in federal district court, basing the bulk of the complaint on the Fair Labor Standards Act.

The outcome of the action, which seeks thousands of dollars in back wages and damages, is pending in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

Imani Woody, pro bono coordinator for the D.C. Bar, said the model complaint showed a commitment beyond the norm and was what won Gallegos the award. She was one of four attorneys to win the award in 1989.

Woody said the model "was a much-needed item at the time and the Bar did not have the wherewithal to complete it. The immigrant community really needed that."

Woody added that Gallegos was chosen



from among nearly 100 attorneys nominated. The screening panel considered such factors as time spent on the project, what was accomplished afterward and the magnitude. The true test, Woody said, is "it has to have some tangible benefit on a large scale."

Parker, of the IPR, said Gallegos, "brought commitment and tenacity and enterprise and expertise that was outstanding. The program provides the opportunity and brings out those qualities in our fellows."

Angela Campbell, associate director of the Institute, had similar praise. "She (Gallegos) worked very hard to develop projects. She was very persistent and stuck with things until she got them done."

Gallegos, 28, was born and raised in New Mexico. While overall her public school education was solid, three rough years in junior high school had a profound impact. She re-

members seeing fights in the hallways, fires in the bathrooms and widespread drug use.

"It was a tough and trying time, going through adolescence and going through all the horrible things in school. But it's had an effect on me, both in what kind of adult I am and what kind of lawyer," Gallegos said.

Letting Conscience Be Her Guide

She earned her juris doctorate from the University of New Mexico, and was a freelance attorney for one year after graduation, working predominantly on civil rights issues. She then joined IPR from 1987 to 1989 as a fellow.

"There's so many areas of law where you hurt people. I wanted an area where I could do good and do work in good conscience," she explained.

Gallegos worked on a variety of projects at IPR. For example, she supervised law students in evaluating the merits of prosecutions filed by D.C. prisoners. In most instances, the inmates allege civil rights violations during their incarceration.

With the legal merits already assessed, the bar gets a quick look at which cases are most pressing and have the best chance of success.

Gallegos, who now holds her LL.M. in Advocacy, works in the Georgetown law firm of Brustein & Manasevit, which specializes in education law. Aside from the general areas, Gallegos also works on equal employment opportunity.

Gallegos says she's content with the move. One reason is the common thread she finds among her colleagues: "The people I work with now are all perfectionists," she says. ■