

Chief Justice Jorge Labarga in Action



(Photo: Tallahassee Democratic File)

By: Liss M. Olivares

I was inspired by the recent profile in The Florida Bar Journal on Chief Justice Jorge Labarga – the first Cuban-American to lead Florida’s judicial branch. I remember hearing about Judge Labarga’s appointment to Florida’s Fourth District Court of Appeal while I worked as a deputy clerk for Florida’s Third District Court of Appeal. Soon thereafter, there was a mandatory reduction of work force due to budget restraints, which caused many of us to lose our jobs - a state-wide issue Chief Justice Labarga is fighting to fix.

Like Judge Labarga, I grew up in Cuba, where Castro sold a dream to a country that was hungry for change. Labarga left at the age of 10 as one of the 500,000 Cubans who arrived in Miami during a 15-year period. I, as many others who left Cuba in hopes of freedom, can relate to the struggle Judge Labarga faced when he “could not speak a word of English when he started the fourth grade in Pahokee, and there were no English-as-a-second-language programs to help him.”¹

This difference in language and culture did not prevent Judge Labarga from striving to achieve his life-long dream – to become a Florida Supreme Court Justice. Labarga earned his undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Florida before starting his law career in 1979 as an assistant public defender in West Palm Beach. In 1996, Labarga was chosen as a circuit court judge in Palm Beach County. Later, in 2008, former Gov. Charlie Crist appointed Labarga to the 4th District Court of Appeal, only to elevate him to the Florida Supreme Court several weeks later. Then on June 30, 2014, he was sworn in as the 56th Chief Justice of Florida, becoming the first Cuban-American to lead the Florida Supreme Court. One week later, he stood in the courtroom and stated, “It means a lot to a lot of people. I just hope I am able to meet their expectations. I will try my hardest.”

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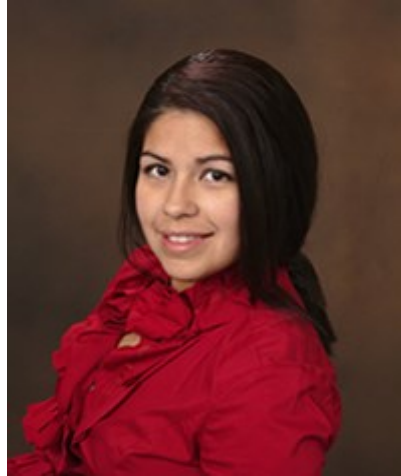
We hope that these changes make big differences in the future.

Well done is better than well said.

- Benjamin Franklin



On behalf of all of the 1.2 million Cubans in Miami, I am proud of Judge Labar-ga's unprecedented accomplishment. In the words of Lt. Gov. Carlos Lopez-Cantera, "From one Cuban-American...to another Cuban-American...let me just say: *Felicidades y le deseo suerte* (Congratulations, and I wish you luck)."



Liss Olivares is at Langley LLP's Miami office, where she exemplifies the firm's aspiration of working smarter. In addition to adding value to clients' cases, she loves raising her one-year-old, Gabriela, and learning. After already having a Certificate in Paralegal Studies, a Bachelors in Criminal Justice, and a second Bachelors in Supervision and Management, she's pursuing her Masters in Public Administration. Liss was the first clerk at the Third DCA to manage Florida's newly mandated electronic filings protocol.