

Profile: Melissa Quinones — Hard Work, Justice, and the Reality of Law

By: Diego A Rodriguez

Melissa Quinones is a Chicago attorney who primarily practices divorce and family law, though she also has experience in criminal defense. After 17 years working as a lawyer, she has developed a reputation built on discipline, organization, and a



strong commitment to helping her clients. However, her path into law did not begin in Chicago. It started in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where she grew up surrounded by the legal profession.

Quinones explained that her interest in law started very early in life because her father worked as a district attorney. Growing up, she was often around lawyers and judges and even went to the courthouse with her father. Because of this, becoming a lawyer always felt like a natural direction for her. As she explained in the interview, “My dad was a state’s attorney... and I grew up basically with attorneys and judges around me all the time.”

Even though she remembers her childhood as positive, it was not always easy. Her parents both worked full-time jobs and often lived paycheck to paycheck to provide for the family. Watching them work so hard had a big impact on her. She said that her childhood taught her the importance of effort and responsibility because “hard work was definitely something that I always grew up watching and observing.”

Living in Puerto Rico also shaped her perspective on opportunity. She explained that sometimes people in Chicago complain about small issues that people in Puerto Rico would consider privileges. She said there are many resources in Chicago that young people might take for granted, including clubs, programs, and community organizations. Because of this experience, she learned to appreciate opportunities and look at the bigger picture.

Her move to Chicago was not something she had planned. After Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, many courts closed and legal work suddenly disappeared. Because of this, she and her family moved to Chicago temporarily to find stability. However, what started as a temporary move quickly became permanent. She described the experience as unexpected and intense, saying that the transition was basically “trial by fire.”

Even after arriving in Chicago, the transition was not easy. Although she was already a licensed attorney, she had to wait about a year for her law license to be validated in Illinois. During that time, she could not practice law and instead worked in a paralegal role to support her family. It was frustrating, but she stayed focused and eventually returned to practicing law.

One thing that helped her build her career in Chicago was being bilingual. Quinones speaks both Spanish and English, which allows her to work with many clients from underserved communities who struggle to communicate with attorneys. She explained that being bilingual “has definitely been a door opening for me,” because it allows her to help people who might otherwise have difficulty navigating the legal system.

Although she has experience in both criminal law and divorce law, Quinones says she prefers family law. She described the difference between the two areas in an interesting way. In criminal defense, she explained, “you get bad people in their best behavior,” but in family law “you get

good people at their worst.” Divorce cases often involve emotional situations, especially when children are involved. In some cases, she even makes recommendations to the court about custody arrangements and parenting time to determine what is best for the child.

Through her experience in the legal system, Quinones has developed her own definition of justice. Many people think justice simply means reaching the correct decision in a case, but she believes timing is also important. According to her, justice should not only provide a solution but should do so quickly enough to help the people involved. She explained, “justice not only has to finish with a remedy, but it also has to happen quickly.”

Another thing she discussed during the interview is how different real life law is compared to what people see in television shows. In many legal dramas, lawyers give dramatic speeches and judges make decisions immediately. In reality, that almost never happens. Quinones explained that judges often take weeks or even months to make a decision after hearing a case.

A typical day for her begins early in court. Many mornings involve court calls or hearings, where attorneys update judges about their cases. After that, she usually spends the afternoon back in the office responding to emails, updating clients, and preparing for upcoming court appearances. Because the schedule can be overwhelming, she believes organization is essential. She said that staying organized helps her stay motivated and manage the constant workload.

Quinones also talked about how technology, especially artificial intelligence, is starting to influence the legal field. She believes AI can be a helpful tool for tasks like research or summarizing documents. However, she warned that AI should never replace professional judgment. According to her, some attorneys have gotten into trouble by relying on AI-generated information without checking it.

When asked what separates successful lawyers from those who struggle, her answer was simple: work ethic. She believes many people underestimate how demanding the legal profession can be. She explained that if someone thinks being a lawyer is just a nine-to-five job, they probably will not succeed. Lawyers need to invest time in preparation, networking, and building relationships within their communities.

She also identified three traits that she believes helped her stand out as an attorney. The first is grit, or the determination to constantly improve and push herself. The second is genuinely caring about her clients and the cases she takes. The third is building strong relationships with people in different professions and communities.

At the end of the interview, Quinones offered advice for college students who are still figuring out their career paths. Instead of only focusing on what they like, she suggested students also think about what they dislike. Sometimes identifying what you do not want to do can make it easier to narrow down the right career.

She also encouraged students to enjoy the college experience while it lasts. While working hard is important, she believes college is also a time to meet new people, try new things, and learn about yourself. As she put it, students should “work hard, but enjoy the ride.”

Overall, Melissa Quinones’s career shows how persistence, discipline, and empathy can shape a successful path. From growing up in Puerto Rico to building a legal career in Chicago, her story reflects the importance of resilience and determination in achieving long-term success.