

Profile: Jessica Juarez

Her background in human rights helps her to humanize her clients and tell a more compelling story to jurors

By Stephen Ellison

Victory and justice are no doubt common goals among trial lawyers, but quite often there are varying philosophies and thus different avenues for achieving those end games, especially when representing individuals. Jessica Juarez, when working up cases for individuals, leans on her extensive background in human rights. She says such an approach allows her clients to reaffirm who they are.

Juarez, a senior partner with San Francisco-based Albert G. Stoll, a Law Corp., does much of her work in the areas of catastrophic injury and employment law and says with those types of cases, the human element is central and crucial.

"When I went into law, I strived to make my cases human; I view them through a human rights lens," she explained. "And those are the types of cases that I tend to enjoy the most. I've worked on burn-injury cases involving little kids, a lot of plaintiffs' rights employment work and catastrophic personal injury. And these are the types of cases that tell a story that's dynamic, that's compelling to potential jurors.

"It's all about taking your client through this," Juarez continued. "Watching them and also nudging them along. When you meet them, they're at this very low point. And then through working their case, you help them get back to who they are and attain their human rights by succeeding in their cases and hopefully changing the situation so that other people don't have that same situation."

Juarez started building her expansive human rights background while she was still in high school, learning through her involvement with Amnesty International. She graduated early from college and continued on that track, getting a job with the United Nations and jumping right into human rights work with the International Labor Organization, an agency of the U.N. From that work, she transitioned to humanitarian assistance, and that essentially opened her up to the world of law.



Juarez

"I just started learning more and more about legal advocacy and looking at lawyers at the U.N.," Juarez said. "I was really interested in the work at the Center for Constitutional Rights. … Their lawyers do work in Guantanamo, with prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. They sue the federal government. It just seems like the human rights component of legal work is something that I've just always been interested in as a person."

Today, Juarez leverages that interest to take on some of the most challenging cases in the areas of employment law, such as gender discrimination within a fire department or government entity, and catastrophic injury, such as a child suffering from burn injuries.

She also leverages the training she received with the Trial Lawyers College, where she learned the skill of psychodrama, she said. Juarez described it as essentially "tuning into your empathy skills." The college teaches trial lawyers to place themselves not only in their client's position, but also in the defendant's position.

"It's like, 'OK, let's learn about this scene that caused this injury.' And you and your team even do this in front of your client," Juarez said. "You take turns. 'Let's go into the person that caused the injury. Let's go into the person that was injured. Let's go into the people who came in the aftermath of the injury.' And it's a very special way of just learning about your case and learning about the people that affect your case – not just your clients, but the actors and the defendants in the case.

"I think using psychodrama and empathy really informs how you litigate a case," she added. "How you ask questions in a deposition; how you act in front of the people you're deposing. Then, generally, just understanding the many layers of this idea that form the case. Because you're looking at it through different lenses and not just solely focused on your client or on your side. I think the compassion that simple exercise builds is with you throughout the whole case once you start to dig and understand your case in that way."

Beyond borders

Juarez was born in Atlanta, where her father was finishing his physician schooling with a residency at one of the city's hospitals. The family then moved to Acapulco, Mexico, and by the time Juarez was six years old, they had returned to the states and settled in San Diego, she said.

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For her undergraduate studies, Juarez moved north to UC Berkeley, where she earned a bachelor's degree in political science. From there, she began working with the U.N. representing the International Labor Organization. She continued working in humanitarian assistance at the U.N. and decided to go to grad school at Columbia University in New York, where she earned a master's degree in international affairs. It was during this time the legal work at the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) began to pique her interest and she looked toward law school.

Juarez returned to the Bay Area to attend UC College of the Law San Francisco (formerly UC Hastings) and worked a short stint with the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland. During law school, she returned to New York on a three-month fellowship at the CCR, where she did research and writing in the areas of civil rights litigation and international law.

Aside from the influence provided by her parents and her upbringing, Juarez said she admired and was inspired by the work of Jose Padilla, former executive director of California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), and Marco Palau, founder of Advocates for Workers Rights.

"Jose Padilla brings lawsuits against (government entities) for people in remote communities, providing them clean drinking water and other resources," Juarez said. "He sues the state or federal government on behalf of less well-to-do communities, getting them access to education, health care and the same level of resources found in other communities.

"Marco (Palau) is just an excellent attorney," she continued. "He does a lot of class action cases for low-wage workers. And, you know, it's like our shared talent, being bilingual attorneys. There's not that many of us. I think that it's unique, unfortunately, even in California, to be able to communicate well and understand not only Spanish but the Latino culture and understand that experience. … Marco Palau has really focused his life and efforts, legally speaking, to help marginalized communities, and I think that, to me, is very important in my advocacy work. Because I think of practicing law as human rights work, human rights advocacy."

Diving in

For the past 12 years, Juarez has been putting that advocacy to good use with the Stoll firm. She went to trial rather early on with a gender discrimination and retaliation case against the Department of Justice. It was a bench trial that involved top female administrators in the DOJ who were denied merited promotions, and it resulted in more than $1 million in compensation for Juarez's clients.

In 2018, Juarez tried another gender discrimination and retaliation case in front of a jury. The claim was against the San Jose Fire Department, involving a pair of women firefighters who were denied promotions. Juarez left few stones unturned in her preparation.

"One of the first things I did was ride on a fire truck to go out on calls," she explained. "I need to know what the culture is because it's a whole different thing. What do I know about the fire department? What do I know about that culture? What do I know about the actual experience other than just getting it through word of mouth from the client?"

Indeed, through the lens of her clients, Juarez was able to ascertain some of the obstacles they overcame as they tried to climb the firefighter ranks, such as what it's like to go to a fire station without a gender-neutral bathroom or no bathroom for women. Or uniforms that are too big for them because they're designed only for men.

Juarez got a "mixed result" in the case, with just one of the two clients winning a $1.49 million settlement.

"Those are the cases that I'm drawn to," Juarez said. "When I was doing that (DOJ) case, obviously, I was a baby lawyer. Did I even know how to do a trial? But you learn and find mentors and you talk to your community. Everybody goes through these growing pains. Some of the most challenging cases, I think, are the ones that you expand your own confidence not only as an attorney, but also as a good citizen in your community."

Active time away

When Juarez is away from the office and courthouse, she enjoys a slew of outdoor sports and activities such as paddleboarding, kayaking and other water sports, plus hiking and biking. She used to make her home in the tony North Bay town of Mill Valley, where there were plenty of avenues for such ventures, she said.

"I really liked Mill Valley because it was like 10 minutes to the beach, 10 minutes to the woods and 20 minutes to San Francisco," she said. "It's amazing. I would be driving to my house, and you could just smell Muir Woods, you know, you smelled forest. I really miss that."

In the area of offering advice, Juarez was a bit hesitant. After giving it much thought, she said in a roundabout way, the following: Don't be afraid to educate yourself, to learn about new things, to believe in yourself and to surround yourself with trusted mentors.

"Don't be afraid to dive into new areas," Juarez said. "I just did an aviation case, and I was like, I don't know anything about aviation law. … But these are the things you do because you see this case as an opportunity to do really good work, you know? You just have to create competence.

"It's called the practice of law for a reason," she continued. "Even some of the most experienced attorneys don't have all the answers. I think it's just a matter of trusting that this is a practice of law and with each case, with each experience, with your eyes open and with mentors around, that's when you grow and you do an exceptional job for your clients."

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