

PRO BONO

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Service Profession

That’s how Laura Benitez Geisler views her vocation

BY LYNNE MARGOLIS

In her 2019 inaugural address as the Dallas Bar Association’s first Hispanic president, Laura Benitez Geisler recited from a letter her uncle, Arnold Garcia, wrote her in 1997, right after she passed the Texas Bar exam. Garcia never actually sent her the letter; he published it instead. He was the editorial page editor at the *Austin American-Statesman*, where it ran on the editorial page under the headline: “The Choice of Leadership: An uncle’s fond advice to a young lawyer starting out.”

“Don’t forget who you are and where you come from,” she quoted. “Don’t forget the responsibility that comes with the privilege of your education and profession. Most importantly, don’t forget that, while leadership is a choice, it is something you owe to those coming up behind you.”

Benitez Geisler looked up at her uncle, who was seated in the ballroom. “That was great advice,” she told him. “I took it to heart.”

BENITEZ GEISLER WAS RAISED in Corpus Christi by her mom, who would bring her third-grade daughter with her while attending community college after work. “I would take my little supplies and my homework, and I’d sit in the back of the classroom and try to be really quiet and pretend like I was in college, too,” Benitez Geisler recalls. Her mom was never quite able to obtain that degree following her divorce from Benitez Geisler’s dad, but she instilled in her daughter the importance of working toward goals—and of helping others to do so, too.

“I really respected, especially in hindsight, how she was just determined to do better,” Benitez Geisler says. “She wanted more for herself.”

Right after earning her law degree from Southern Methodist University, Benitez Geisler joined the first Dallas Association of Young Lawyers

Leadership Class. She became president of the Dallas Women Lawyers Association in 2003, and by 2007, she was president of the DAYL.

Then she was elected to the Dallas Bar Association board and began working toward her historic 2019 term as the only Hispanic president in the DBA’s 150-year history. She launched the Entrepreneurs in Community Lawyering program, which trains young lawyers to establish practices serving lower-income clients. In exchange for their free year of training, participants commit to providing at least 200 hours of pro bono legal services. To date, the incubator program has led to over 8,000 hours of pro bono work.

“When I think about the positive impact it has had in the lives of the participating lawyers and the clients who have benefited from their services, I am reminded why I love this profession and the many ways we can give in service to others,” she says. “We’re in a service profession; we should be serving those who need our help.”

Benitez Geisler began envisioning additional ways to address the access-to-justice gap in Dallas after co-chairing the DBA’s 2014-15 Equal Access to Justice Campaign, which raises funds to support pro bono services for low-income Dallas County residents. That campaign was the first to raise over \$1 million, setting a benchmark now met regularly.

Even if participants don’t wind up gearing their practices toward clients of modest means, Benitez Geisler—who loves mentoring, sits on the state Bar’s grievance committee and is a Dallas Bar Foundation trustee—encourages them to be generous with their time and money.

But before she became the DBA president, she almost quit the board altogether. At the time, she was raising her daughter and running her own practice.

“I remember having the distinct fork-in-the-road moment where I was just tired and a little burned out on the service, and I

wasn’t quite sure that I wanted to see it all the way through,” she admits.

Then a law student approached her and told her she was an inspiration. “It became clear to me that the position was really not about myself,” she says. “It was more about holding that role so that other people—other lawyers of color, and especially young female lawyers—could see that it was possible.”

She knew she had to keep going.

“I’m so glad I did,” she says. “I wouldn’t trade that experience for the world.” 📌

Little Moments

One Saturday, then-Dallas Bar President Benitez Geisler presented keys to the recipient of a DBA-sponsored Habitat for Humanity home. The new homeowner, a Hispanic single mother, asked for a hug afterward, and as they embraced, tears streamed down the woman’s face. “She was so grateful and said, ‘I can’t believe lawyers would do this for me.’ She also expressed how much it meant to have me doing it, as an example to her daughter that she can do this, too,” Benitez Geisler says. “Those little moments mean the world to me.”



Benitez Geisler with her uncle, Arnold Garcia.



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