

Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Sky L. Peña-Davis

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, news and insights from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher. As part of our celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion is sponsoring a series of interviews with employees of Hispanic descent.

Today we're joined by Sky L. Peña-Davis of the Office of Policy and Planning. Ms. Peña-Davis has 20 years of experience as a criminal justice and addictions professional. With that experience, she provides vital support to drug and veterans courts throughout the state. She's a member of the New York State Impaired Driving Advisory Council Committee, which strives to improve highway safety. She is also a member of the New York State Bar Association's Committee on Veterans, which provides programs for attorneys and the public on veteran's issues.

Ms. Peña-Davis worked at the Center for Court Innovation in the New York City Treatment Alternatives for Safer Communities. She is a speaker on Drug Court and Veterans Court topics and serves on multiple associations, committees and advisory boards. Ms. Peña-Davis received her bachelor's degree from John Jay College of Criminal Justice and her master's degree from Long Island University/CW Post College. Sky's parents immigrated from the Dominican Republic in the mid-1960s, and she grew up in Queens.

Sky, I thank you for your time. On the occasion of Hispanic Heritage Month, what do you wish other Americans better understood about the Dominican Republic?

Sky Davis: I think that people should know that the Dominican Republic is more than just really nice beaches and all-inclusive resorts. It shares land with neighboring Haiti. It's the second largest island in the Caribbean and it has beautiful landscape, mountains, fishing villages. The Dominican people are fun people. They're very giving people. They love to dance, and we talk very loud! We're very passionate and we love to celebrate life.

John Caher: That sounds like a great tradition, particularly in these times. Tell me about your somewhat unusual and very uplifting name, "Sky." Where'd that come from?

Sky Davis: I wish I had a really exciting story to tell you about that.

John Caher: You can always make one up!

Sky Davis: My middle name is actually "Light," L-I-G-H-T. My dad liked original names and he just said, "I want my first daughter to be named 'Sky Light.'"

John Caher: That's beautiful. That's wonderful.

Sky Davis: People usually think that my parents were hippies or that they were smoking something on a mountain, but it's nothing like that. I don't have an exotic story like that.

John Caher: That's a great story. I thought maybe it was short for Skylar or something like that, but the real story is better. Now, why did your parents leave the Dominican Republic? And why did they choose the United States?

Sky Davis: They came to the United States for opportunity, like most immigrants. At the time, they were living and they were raised under a dictatorship. When the dictator was assassinated, the US, a few years later, created the Immigration and Naturalization Act. Many people, many immigrants, took advantage of it to come to the United States for opportunity. Trujillo, the dictator, was assassinated, I think, in the early '60s, and then the INS Act came about in the mid-'60s.

John Caher: So, it was in the mid-'60s that your parents were able to come to the United States?

Sky Davis: Yes, and it was very easy back then because they just obtained travel visas. That's how easy it was to get to the US.

John Caher: It was a lot easier probably than now.

Sky Davis: Oh yes, definitely.

John Caher: What did your parents do?

Sky Davis: When they came to this country, there was a language barrier as many immigrants have language barriers. They worked. My mom worked in different factories. Back then there were a lot of things that were made in America, so there was a lot of factory work. She worked in different factories. Then when the jobs got slow, she was laid off, and then she would go to another factory to work in another, make something else. I think she did curtains in one place, sunglasses in another place. She did clothing in another factory. She was also a home attendant for a little bit. Then, as her kids got older, of school age, she became a stay-at-home mom.

My dad came to this country and he started working in restaurants as a dishwasher, a grill cook. He drove a cab for some years, and then his big

opportunity hit when he became a porter at a nursing home. I say it was a big opportunity because it was the job that provided him with medical benefits and union benefits and a pension, and so my dad stayed with that job till he retired.

John Caher: They seem like great role models.

Sky Davis: It's hard to come to a country where you don't know the language, and you're just trying to fit in. Then you meet really good people who show you the way. That's how fortunate they were. They met people who showed them how to own a home and helped them become homeowners. They instilled that in us, that you have to save, then you should own your own home, have your own property. Things like that.

John Caher: Now, this is in Queens where you were living?

Sky Davis: Yes. We were born and raised in Queens. Particularly when they came to this country, they came to Corona, Queens, which is where the majority of the Dominicans lived at that time. It was either Corona, Queens, or Washington Heights, and so they lived in Corona, Queens for the majority of their time. That's where I was born and raised.

John Caher: Now you mentioned the language barrier. What language do your parents speak?

Sky Davis: They both speak Spanish. Although my dad became a little fluent, my mom, she's learned enough to carry a conversation, but she never became as fluent as my dad.

John Caher: Now is the dialect different or were they able to communicate freely and easily with people from different Hispanic nations say, well, Puerto Rico?

Sky Davis: Puerto Rican Spanish and the Dominican Spanish are very similar. They didn't have difficulty communicating with Puerto Ricans. But immigrants, when they come to the US, tend to travel in packs and they live with their own community. They just communicated with their family members and they all worked in the same industries. Everybody gets a job for someone else, so it's not like you're working with someone you don't know. Then you're working with someone who speaks your language, so they didn't have a need to learn how to speak English.

John Caher: I see. Let's turn the focus toward you if I could. Obviously, you had an early interest in criminal justice since you enrolled in the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. What led you to that field?

Sky Davis: That was very interesting. When I was younger, I sort of became my parents' navigator. I had to take them to their medical appointments, their educational appointments, anything that had to do with school, I had to be there because I was the translator. I was a translator for a lot of different things that they needed to do. They didn't know their rights, they didn't know how to advocate for themselves. I had to do that for them.

I didn't have anybody to help me navigate the educational system. I had to learn it on my own. When I was in high school, they had mentioned that New York City had a CUNY system, and that's what I knew of, this CUNY system that had these colleges. I looked at the list and I said, "Oh, I want to leave Queens because I only knew of Queens." I said, I wanted to go to Manhattan.

John Jay was just one of the schools that I applied to and it accepted me. It was just by happenstance, how it happened. It's not like now, people research, they do a lot of research to pick the schools that they want to go to. They sort of know more or less what field they want to be in it. It was just sort of happenstance. I wanted to get out of Queens, and so I ended up going to John Jay College.

John Caher: Then, what did you get your master's in?

Sky Davis: I got my master's in criminal justice and public administration. It was an interdisciplinary degree, but back then, I sort of felt like I wanted to stay in criminal justice. I took a liking to it, like all the stuff that I was learning.

John Caher: There are a lot of different routes to go in criminal justice, but you chose to work on, for most of your career really, to alternatives to incarceration, especially as it relates to veterans and those with substance use issues. Why did you gravitate to that field rather than any of the many other opportunities in criminal justice?

Sky Davis: I think I gravitated towards that because I enjoy working with vulnerable populations, and I think because my parents were a vulnerable population. My dad was also an alcoholic, so working in the substance abuse field and criminal justice gave me a greater understanding into his illness.

Sometimes you don't know why you choose a field that you go into, you just sort of feel like the universe pulls you into a particular direction. I just took a liking to that, and I stayed with it for, gosh, close to 30 years now, I think, or maybe a little over 25.

John Caher: I would imagine in that field you have great triumphs and great accomplishments and great achievements, and heartbreaking losses. You can't save everyone. What is a really good day in your professional life, and what is an unhappy day?

Sky Davis: At the Office of Policy and Planning, we're a help center for the problem-solving courts. We provide a lot of training to the courts, because sometimes these courts, there's a lot of turnover, whether it's turnover with the judges, the legal community or the clinical community. We all work together to serve these participants that are struggling because we want them to succeed. Their success means that a community improves a little bit. The family unity is also improved. Giving these courts the tools to serve these populations is very gratifying to me. I feel lucky that I get to do the job that I do.

John Caher: That's a great way to put it. Now, what do you do in your free time to unwind?

Sky Davis: In my free time, I like to decorate and redecorate my house, and my husband and I have a small place in the mountain. And we like to go there just to unwind and relax a little bit.

John Caher: That sounds lovely. Now, America is of course the melting pot, as they say, a wonderful stew of different cultures. How does it benefit the country, the court system, and you personally to draw from a number of different cultures that you will inevitably encounter in your daily life?

Sky Davis: I think diversity is a beautiful thing, and being raised in Queens, where there are so many different cultures, it's just what I'm used to. The court system, again, it's a multicultural workplace and I appreciate that. I appreciate that diversity. Diversity in work culture, I think it goes hand in hand. I think at the court system, there's so many things that we do to highlight different cultures that people are not aware of, like this podcast. I wasn't aware of it.

The office of Diversity and Inclusion, I don't think many people know that they exist either. I think while we have these things, I think we should shout them out a little bit more. But I think the benefits of living and working in a multicultural setting is that you learn a lot from different cultures, and it broadens your world view of different places and people. I think it's great.

John Caher: It certainly does broaden one's view to hear different perspectives from different cultures and different regions. It can make you a more rounded person.

Sky Davis: Yeah, I agree.

John Caher: Have you found the court system welcoming to people of diverse backgrounds?

Sky Davis: Oh yeah, definitely. I definitely think so. I think it's nice that we get to learn from people that we know very little about. It's all in how comfortable we are in asking people about their culture, their beliefs and their values. I know Dominicans love to talk about themselves, so you can strike up a conversation

with any one of us and ask about their culture and they will be happy to brag about it.

John Caher: Well, since you were a Dominican who loves to talk about yourself and brag about your culture, let me hit you with one last question. Are there any cultural traditions that you and your family maintain that you'd like to share with us, with the rest of the melting pot?

Sky Davis: My mom lives with me and we speak Spanish at home, and my mom constantly makes authentic Dominican food. Pre-COVID, we would always have these large gatherings just to eat and to hear music and to dance just because it was a Saturday afternoon and it was just something fun to do and just to get together and reminisce. Obviously, during COVID we can't do that, but that's our tradition. It's just eating traditional food and listening to music and dancing and just having a good time.

John Caher: What is the traditional food?

Sky Davis: My favorite, *favorite*, that my mom makes is called sancocho. It's like a stew, and I don't go out to restaurants to get it because, in my mind, nobody makes it better than my mother.

John Caher: I'm sure that's true.

Sky Davis: She makes rice, typical rice, beans and a protein, which is like a stewed meat or chicken or something, but she makes it all. She's a great cook, my mom.

John Caher: Well, you're making me very hungry. I just want to thank you for taking the time to talk with us today and thank you for your service at the court for all this time and what you do for veterans and the drug-addicted population.

Sky Davis: Thank you so much, John. This is so much fun. You made it so easy.

John Caher: I'm glad. Have a great day.

Thanks for listening to Amici. You'll find all of our recent podcasts on the court system's website at www.nycourts.gov, and you will also find a transcript of each interview. If you have a suggestion for an Amici podcast, let me know. I'm John Caher, and I can be reached at 518-453-8669 or jcaher@nycourts.gov. In the meantime, stay tuned.