

## **Diversity Dialogue: Sylvia T. Miranda**

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insight from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

As part of our celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month, the Office of Diversity & Inclusion is sponsoring a series of interviews with employees of Hispanic descent. Today we're honored to be joined by Sylvia T. Miranda, a court analyst in the civil side of Brooklyn's Supreme Court.

Sylvia was born in the Bronx, of Puerto Rican parents, but the family moved back to Puerto Rico and she spent her childhood there. In October, Sylvia was elected President of the Cervantes Society, an organization in the courts, that will be celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2021.

Sylvia, thank you for your time. On the occasion of Hispanic Heritage Month, what do you wish other Americans better understood, about Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans?

Sylvia Miranda: Well, there was a lot of controversy when Hurricane Maria hit the island, as to whether or not Puerto Ricans were citizens. And there was a big, huge misconception about Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico is a Commonwealth of the United States. It's a US territory. A lot of people know it as a vacation island in the Caribbean. But when Puerto Rico was first visited by Columbus, it was inhabited by Arawak Indians.

These Indians went island hopping from South America down to the Caribbean and populated most of the Caribbean Islands, including Puerto Rico.

There's a big misconception that those Indians were called "Taino." "Taino" is actually an Arawak salutation and Columbus misunderstood it, as the Indians saying that they were Taino, which is not the case. Puerto Rico is a rich mix of cultures from the Arawak Indians, from Europeans, French, from Spain, and then also from the African slaves that were brought to the island to work the sugarcane fields, as slave labor. So that encompasses Puerto Ricans, in terms of their culture.

John Caher: That's fascinating. So, the Puerto Ricans of African descent are the descendants of slaves, almost inherently, right?

Sylvia Miranda: Yes, those three cultures came together during the occupation of the Spanish and then also the Americans. So those three cultures are, essentially, what make up the Puerto Rican. In some cases, the European heritage, the genealogy is stronger than African, but we're all a mix of those three cultures.

John Caher: That's fascinating. You're also all, United States citizens, and you're also all eligible to be elected president, and I'm not sure people know that.

Sylvia Miranda: The interesting thing is—funny that you should mention that—presidential elections are *not* held on the island of Puerto Rico. We're citizens, but we cannot vote *if* we reside on the island. However, if we reside on the mainland in the US or Hawaii, we can vote. We can register to vote and vote for the president. But if we live on the island of Puerto Rico, we cannot.

John Caher: That's interesting.

Sylvia Miranda: Very, very, because the other caveat is that, you can be drafted. If you live in Puerto Rico, you can be drafted into the Armed Forces. However, you cannot vote for the president, but if you live on the mainland, you can vote for the president and also of course, you can be drafted.

John Caher: That sounds immensely unjust. You can be drafted, and you have no say in the election?

Sylvia Miranda: Yeah. It's a very confusing status for Puerto Ricans. I mean, it's been a debate for years as to whether or not it should become a state or remain as is, or become independent and there's a big controversy on what the future entails for Puerto Rico, in terms of the autonomy that it should have.

John Caher: Sure. Well, I'm afraid that's a problem we're not going to solve in this podcast!

Sylvia Miranda: No, no!

John Caher: Okay. So, you were born in the Bronx, I believe? And then your family returned to Puerto Rico. Well, first, why did they come to New York? And then why did they go back?

Sylvia Miranda: Well, during the time my parents were in Puerto Rico, it was the aftermath of the Great Depression. So, Puerto Rico had a hard time recovering from that, economically. It was always in the back of people's mind to get better opportunities on the mainland. And there was a great migration during the time that my parents decided to migrate to the US. They did so for employment opportunities and a better way of life. They made the decision to leave and make a new life for us in New York.

My dad worked for a watch factory, and then my mom worked for a doll factory, sewing the hair of dolls, back in the day, when it was done manually. But they always dreamed about going back. The interesting thing about Puerto Ricans who left the island to come to New York or the United States, is they always had the dream of going back. So, making the money and then going back to the island, that was always a goal for them to do so, in the future. My dad won the Puerto Rican lottery.

John Caher: Oh, wow.

Sylvia Miranda: Yeah, it's a great story.

John Caher: Tell me the story! I want to hear it.

Sylvia Miranda: It's a different kind of lottery and what it is, it's like a sheet of different tickets. So, each ticket is, I think back in that time, it was probably 25 cents. You could buy the whole sheet, or you could just buy one little stub. So, my father bought the whole sheet and back then, I think it was \$100,000, so it was a lot of money, we're talking about close to 50 years ago. With that money, he decided to purchase land, build a house, and then, also, he bought investment properties to provide income for us, and then we moved back. We moved back when I was in elementary school, just graduating from elementary school.

John Caher: What was your adolescence like in Puerto Rico?

Sylvia Miranda: At first it was hard because, the interesting thing is, the school kids didn't consider me as a Puerto Rican. They would call me a New York Rican because I wasn't really a Puerto Rican because I was born in New York and then was being raised in Puerto Rico. There was also a language barrier because my parents, although they spoke only Spanish, because we were school age, myself and my siblings, we would answer them in

English and believe it or not, we understood each other. We understood each other.

So going back to Puerto Rico and not knowing conversational Spanish was a challenge, but I had great teachers and they saw that I was so willing to overcome that obstacle and really learn about the history of Puerto Rico, learn about my culture and really try to assimilate and also do well in my other subjects. And those teachers, they were amazing, and I'm very grateful to them.

John Caher: What brought you back to New York?

Sylvia Miranda: I decided to apply to college and I really didn't want to stay in Puerto Rico. I had already three siblings that were either graduated from college or were in college when I was applying. I had gotten scholarships from Brown University, Harvard, Princeton, and then I applied to Wesleyan and got a full ride scholarship and that's where my sister was attending, and I just wanted to follow in her footsteps. So that was in Middletown, Connecticut and I went there for four years, always coming back to the island for summer and Christmas vacation. But that's why I left Puerto Rico.

John Caher: And what did you major in at Wesleyan?

Sylvia Miranda: Anthropology and Spanish literature. It was a liberal arts college.

John Caher: Sure. And a very, very good one.

Sylvia Miranda: Yes.

John Caher: But when you were in college, was it your plan to stay on the mainland or was it your plan to return to Puerto Rico?

Sylvia Miranda: Well, my siblings were in New York and I started applying to jobs in both Puerto Rico and New York. But when I got offered a really good position in New York, I decided to stay because my sisters were established there. So, I went to stay with them for a couple of months until I got my own place. I just felt that I wanted to be independent, as opposed to going back to Puerto Rico. I felt that I wanted to hold my own in New York, so I decided to stay in New York.

John Caher: And where were you working at that time?

Sylvia Miranda: I was working for Republic National Bank. I don't know if it's still in existence. But we were working in the back office operations, for the trading floor.

John Caher: And then, how did you go from that to the court system?

Sylvia Miranda: Well, for years I was in the financial industry. I was working for banks. I became a federal funds trader on the floor, and I wanted to get my MBA. So, I decided to apply to Columbia Business School, and then I did that. And then I was working as a healthcare consultant, and I did that for a couple of years. And then, as I was doing that, I got married, I had kids, I had my two oldest kids and then I became pregnant with my third one and I really wanted to slow down because that's such a crazy industry, the financial industry.

John Caher: Of course.

Sylvia Miranda: So, I decided to stay home, do some consulting work, but focus on homeschooling my son. And then after four years, I wanted to get back into the workforce, but the financial industry is very unforgiving when you take time off. They don't see you staying home with your kids as an important career choice. So, I had a hard time trying to get back into the financial industry. And in that interim, I had a friend who had to take a leave of absence, had to take a family medical leave, and she asked me if I would step in and I was hired by one of the judges in Queens Supreme Criminal Court until she was ready to come back, and I did that. I figured it's, you know the saying, "It's always easier to find a job when you have a job."

It wasn't demanding, which I was very grateful for that, because my son needed my time also. So, it was a good trade off. Then when she decided to come back, I didn't realize, but I was very grateful for that also, that there was a clause that for 90 days they could place you, the court system would place you until you were offered a position, or if not, then you would have to leave the court system. So, there was a position that was available with the Supreme Court Civil Chief Clerk's Office. And I came here and got along well with Chief Clerk Charles Small, and he decided to hire me as a court analyst.

John Caher: And what exactly is it that you do?

Sylvia Miranda: Well, I work on special initiatives, that he may have and perform confidential analysis and research and planning for the court system. Let's say if the Supreme Court has certain stats that they want to run, to

take a look at staffing or particular court cases, then I do all those studies and reports, and I issue them to the Chief Clerk. Then I also am in charge of updating the website for the Supreme Court. So, I deal with all the updates to the Judges' Part Rules. I've been especially busy now with COVID, because things are changing day-to-day. So those website updates have been keeping me quite busy and we're partially back from the pandemic.

John Caher: Yeah. This is continuing to be a very much, a moving target. I know.

Sylvia Miranda: Yeah. Yeah. But it keeps me busy and I like keeping busy.

John Caher: Yes, you do. And you're also very active in the Cervantes Society, as I said in the introduction. You were elected in October, I believe?

Sylvia Miranda: Yes.

John Caher: So, let's talk about that a little bit. What exactly is the Cervantes Society and how did it come to be?

Sylvia Miranda: Well, the Cervantes Society is a 501(c)(3) fraternal organization that was founded in 1996, out of the need for seeking equality and fair representation of Hispanics in the court system. There was a handful of Hispanic employees during that time and many felt that an organization was needed to be an advocate for recruiting more Hispanic professionals, not only in clerical positions, but also as court officers and as lieutenants, captains, majors, court clerks, and judges and law clerks. So, the Cervantes Society was crucial in making that happen throughout all these years and ensuring that these positions were kept.

John Caher: And it has happened, hasn't it, to a large degree? Hispanics are much better represented now, than they were then. Right?

Sylvia Miranda: Absolutely. Absolutely. There's still work to be done, but it's much better than it was back in 1996, where, like I said, the organization was needed to be an advocate for those positions and to expand the diversity of the court system.

John Caher: Now you're very busy with your job. You're busy with the Cervantes Society, what do you do to unwind in your free time?

Sylvia Miranda: I have a lot of hobbies. I love to do do-it-yourself projects. We own a house and a house is always in need of some sort of repair or some sort of change in whatever, a bathroom, a kitchen. So, I've taken courses on

renovations so I could put up sheet rock and change an outlet if I needed to, and I also love making jewelry. Whenever we go on vacation, I collect seashells and sea glass and I design jewelry and sometimes I sell it, but for the most part, I just give it away as gifts to my family and friends.

John Caher: What a great thing to do! Now, as you educated me at the beginning, someone from Puerto Rico is inherently a walking melting pot of cultures. And of course, that's part of the American dream, this stew of different cultures. How does that benefit the country, the court system, and you personally?

Sylvia Miranda: You know, it's so important learning about other cultures. It just helps us to understand different perspectives within the world in which we live. It helps to dispel negative stereotypes and also personal biases about different cultural and ethnic groups. I just think that being a diverse people creates a richness in opinion and makes us compassionate about certain issues and about others. It just benefits everyone, as opposed to being a homogeneous group that's self-contained and not open to change or seeing change in others.

When I was growing up, being Hispanic meant being Puerto Rican, because that was the ethnic group that was most common in New York, and I guess in the United States in general. And then seeing my kids interact with their school friends, I would always ask, "What's your ethnic composition, or what are you?" And for the most part, it was always, even though they were Hispanic, it wasn't just solely being Puerto Rican, it's being half Guatemalan, half Puerto Rican, half black, and it's just gratifying to see that richness, that we're seeing more and more, being a commonality amongst us.

And it's just really important to understand those differences, that for the most part, makes us a richer country because of the cultural diversity that's existed in this country. It makes us a better country when we recognize those differences and embrace those differences, because it just makes us more open to different perspectives. I just believe that cultural diversity is so important in this country and in other countries, but in this country in particular. And also, reflecting those differences in the different industries and the workforce, that we see that, and our kids see that, that richness.

John Caher: Thank you for that beautiful explanation, that was really wonderful. Now in the spirit of Hispanic Heritage Month, are there any cultural traditions that you and your family maintain, that you'd like to share with the melting pot, those who may not be familiar with Puerto Rican customs?

Sylvia Miranda: Well, there's this one celebration that, unfortunately, is getting diluted more and more, as the years pass by, but I think it's such a beautiful tradition that we celebrate, and it's Three Kings Day. It's on January 6th, it's right after Christmas and the New Year. And what Three Kings Day celebrates is, it acknowledges the three kings that traveled hundreds of miles to visit and bring gifts to the newborn King of Israel, Jesus Christ, and in Puerto Rico, that's celebrated. At one point, it was celebrated more so than Christmas, but now it's being more and more diluted. I think it's such a great celebration. I'm hoping that the custom of celebrating Three Kings Day, the Epiphany they call it, continues because it's a great celebration of love and of giving.

John Caher: Yeah, that's fascinating because as I recall, the Magi, the three Kings, were a very diverse group.

Sylvia Miranda: Yes!

John Caher: There were three Kings from very different places. Correct?

Sylvia Miranda: Right! That's correct! That's correct! So, it really represents the cultural diversity that we come from and we should continue celebrating.

John Caher: Thanks for listening to Amici. You'll find all of our recent podcasts on the court system's website at [www.nycourts.gov](http://www.nycourts.gov) and most are also on the iTunes podcast nightly. If you have a suggestion for an Amici podcast, please let me know. I'm John Caher and I can be reached at (518) 453-8669 or [jcaher@nycourts.gov](mailto:jcaher@nycourts.gov). In the meantime, stay tuned.