

Twenty Years Of Achievements: Connecticut Hispanic Lawyers

By Lisa S. Lenkiewicz

In the fall of 1993, a committed group of Hispanic lawyers, meeting in New Haven, formed the Connecticut Hispanic Bar Association (CHBA). Among their original and lofty goals were to enhance the visibility of Hispanic lawyers in the state and to work on specific Latino and Hispanic issues. Twenty years later, the group has much of which to be proud.

Membership and honorees in the bar group include more than 100 lawyers, among them recent appointments to the Connecticut state judiciary, the first Hispanic to serve on the United States Supreme Court, the first Hispanics to serve as judges on the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, the first Hispanic state commissioner and the first Hispanic to run for attorney general.

While precise statistics are difficult to ascertain, CHBA President, Attorney Erick Diaz, estimates Hispanic attorneys account for only 1.5 percent of all attorneys in Connecticut. However, other Hispanic attorneys may have a non-Hispanic name or do not self-identify as such, he explained.

In addition, Diaz believes the number of Hispanic attorneys who are partners in mid-size to large-size firms in the state is less than one percent of the total partners at these firms.

“Considering that about 40 percent of Connecticut’s population is Hispanic,” said Diaz, “we are clearly under-represented in the partnership ranks at mid-to-large law firms in Connecticut.”

While there remains a need to increase diversity in Connecticut’s legal profession, CHBA has achieved great progress in only two decades. Diaz, counsel of The Hayber Law Firm in Hartford, proudly lists some of these key CHBA achievements:

- Creating a Connecticut Hispanic Bar Association Fund through the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving; this fund has awarded dozens of educational scholarships to Hispanic law students to help fund their legal educations.
- Lobbying with other groups to encourage the Connecticut General Assembly to enact legislation to hire and train additional court interpreters and to have the state join a consortium providing access to a network of interpreters. “Given the increasing Hispanic population in Connecticut, some of whom do not speak English, this has been very significant in helping a segment of our population to gain access to justice through our court system,” explained Diaz.
- Supporting the nomination and eventual confirmation of Carmen Espinosa, in 2011, as the first Hispanic appointed to serve as a judge of the State Appellate Court; then, in 2013, Justice Espinosa became the first Hispanic justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court.
- Creating a formal mentoring program for Hispanic law students. Diaz noted, “This is significant as some Hispanic law students may be the first in their families to attend law school, or sometimes, even undergraduate studies.”
- Earning the Hispanic National Bar Association’s recognition in 2011 as Affiliate of the Year for contributions to the Hispanic community in Connecticut.

The Next 20 Years

Hartford Santiago Law Group Attorney Rafael Santiago, one of the original founders of the bar group, said he is pleased to see a new generation of leading attorneys to guide CHBA into the future. The CHBA “now has an ongoing life of its own,” he said.

One such member of this new generation is Attorney Alfredo Fernandez, an associate at the Hartford law firm Shipman & Goodwin. He serves on the CHBA board as director of communications.

“The incoming CHBA members acknowledge how much effort has been exerted by the founders and the lineage of leaders leading up to this 20-year milestone. My generation is fortunate to step into an established network of talented Hispanic attorneys who have found success in a wide variety of legal sectors,” said Fernandez.

The Connecticut Hispanic Bar Association’s 20th anniversary awards celebration will be held on Thursday, Nov. 14, at 6 p.m., at Saint Clemens Castle in Portland.. The Honorable Jose A. Cabranes, a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, is the featured guest speaker. **CHBA founding members will be honored along with United Technologies Corporation and The Center for Children’s Advocacy.** For more information:margaret.castinado@jud.ct.gov