

Florida Department of Education Hispanic Heritage Month

Winning Elementary School Essay by Stella Jurkovic

Myriam Irizarry was Pinellas County's first Hispanic judge. I had the honor of interviewing Mrs. Irizarry, to better understand her path to becoming a judge. She described her struggles as a child, where she lived in a shack with her single mom and her six other siblings in Puerto Rico (M. Irizarry, personal interview, October 4, 2021). When she was three years old, she moved to New York. Later her home burned down leaving her family homeless and afraid. When she was in NY, she learned English with her siblings. On the other hand, her mom didn't, so Myriam was her mom's interpreter. Her mom called Myriam her little lawyer (M. Irizarry, personal interview, October 4, 2021).

Eventually, her dreams came true, and she got her bachelors and law degree from Rutgers University (staff, 2019). She took a job in Legal Services to help indigent people with civil matters, and soon she moved to criminal court (Smith, 2021). During this time, she helped people in her community as a public defender (staff, 2019). According to the SPC Blog, Mrs. Irizarry said "I could see myself with the same struggles they have. I do a lot of talking and helping them understand they can overcome things they're facing and not let bad influences bring them down." Her experiences growing up helped her relate to the people she served. Then, she worked with Circuit Court while teaching part-time at St. Petersburg College (staff, 2019). Finally, she started the long process of trying to be appointed as a judge. At last, she accomplished her goal and made her way to the court room to be Pinellas County's first Hispanic judge where she continued serving her community (staff, 2019).

Throughout her life, Mrs. Irizarry has helped the community in many ways. One way she helped is that she was a lawyer for people who could not afford them. She was also involved a lot with helping the poor. I remember her saying she loved giving back to the community. She has been actively involved with the community since high school. Another way she helped was that she was a bilingual lawyer. She helped by providing legal counsel for Spanish speaking people of Pinellas (staff, 2019). According to Tampa Bay Times she had done "pro bono work through Clearwater Bar, Gulfcoast Legal services and the Intercultural Advocacy Institute (staff, 2019).

Myriam persevered through so many difficult situations and remained hopeful. You would think if your house burned down, you would be sad and hopeless, but Myriam did not let it get her down. It is remarkable that she grew up in a shack in the mountains in Puerto Rico, but then made it to the court room to pursue her dreams, where she served and helped the community immensely. She is such an inspiration to all. She had all these reasons to fail, yet she always found a way to succeed.