

Spotlight on Affiliate Leaders: Minnesota Hispanic Bar Association's Rising Star

By Jill M. Kastner

Last January, Melisa Lopez Franzen was named to the Twin Cities' "Top 25 on the Rise" by the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce for making positive changes in her community. This month, *The Affiliate* highlights Melisa not only for her work in Minnesota, but also for her efforts and dedication on the national level with the Hispanic National Bar Association (HNBA) and the ABA Young Lawyers Division (ABA YLD).

"I make time for things I believe in and things where I can make an impact," said Lopez Franzen. This year, she serves as President of the Minnesota Hispanic Bar Association (MHBA) and also as the HNBA's representative to the ABA YLD. Lopez Franzen became involved in these organizations "to build relationships with legal professionals, network, and get involved with the community. The HNBA is a fantastic national network of professionals."

HNBA YLD

"I first became involved with the HNBA during law school when I participated in the HNBA 2005 Moot Court Competition," said Lopez Franzen, whose team won an award their first year at the competition. "As a new attorney, I co-chaired the Moot Court Competition for the 2007 HNBA Mid-Year Conference in Minneapolis."

When she joined the HNBA, it did not have a young lawyers section. Already appointed by then-HNBA President Ramona Romero as HNBA representative to the ABA YLD, Lopez Franzen found the opportunity to generate more opportunities for young Hispanic attorneys: "I drafted the HNBA YLD bylaws that established the YLD section of the HNBA for the first time in its history," she said. The HNBA YLD was successfully launched at the 2009 HNBA Annual Convention in Albuquerque, New Mexico. "I am currently working on a collaborative effort with the nonprofit organization, Casa de Esperanza, as an extension of the ABA YLD program 'Voices Against Violence' to be rolled out at the 2010 HNBA Annual Convention in the Twin Cities."

Hispanic Community Advocates in Minnesota

Lopez Franzen continues to make significant time for the MHBA. Founded in 1991, the MHBA organizes Hispanic attorneys, judges, and law students to promote the legal profession and serve as an advocate for the Hispanic community in Minnesota. Lopez Franzen first became involved with MHBA in her second year of law school when she was appointed the student representative and worked with Línea Legal Latina, a pro bono legal service provider. Only two years after graduation, the group elected her its President-Elect.

Serving as President this year, Lopez Franzen is responsible for MHBA's various programs, including law student mentoring and the preparations for hosting the thirty-fifth Hispanic National Bar Association Annual Convention for 2010.

MHBA's most recent service was hosting an event to celebrate the historic confirmation of Justice Sonia Sotomayor to the U.S. Supreme Court. With over 500 attendees, including Senators Amy Klobuchar and Al Franken, the success of the celebration was inspiring to all. Lopez Franzen commented: "The event was one of my proudest collaborations, to create awareness about diversity on the bench and create awareness of the rich diversity in our profession."

Lopez Franzen is proud of MHBA's pro-bono legal services with its long-standing community partners. One such partner, Línea Legal Latina, provides legal advice phone services to low-income Spanish speakers. Volunteer bilingual attorneys provide a coordinated legal "first responder" system so callers receive legal advice or referrals quickly.

"It is important to give back to the community. As attorneys we are privileged with the skills that can have a big impact on the community." If an attorney is new to the Minneapolis area, Lopez Franzen asks that he or she consider becoming a volunteer for the Línea Legal Latina.

Growing in the Profession

Lopez Franzen grew up in Puerto Rico in a middle class family. "My family always stressed the importance of education. My parents decided to put my two sisters and me through private bilingual school, and that has been the biggest gift that they have given us." Lopez Franzen received her bachelor's degree from the Inter American University of Puerto Rico before getting her masters in public policy at the University of Minnesota. She continued her education, obtaining her law degree from Hamline University School of Law in 2006. "I went to grad school and then law school thinking you can never be too qualified or have too much education."

American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division
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“I always wanted to impact policy and law,” she said, adding, “Bar associations introduce a young attorney to a diverse body of attorneys who can provide resources or opportunities to grow in the profession.”

Lopez Franzen is an attorney with Target Corporation in the Government Affairs Department where she oversees civic affairs issues for the western region of the United States. In this role, she consults on local policy issues that have a financial impact on operations or have an effect on the corporation’s reputation and serves as a liaison between Target, local governments, and trade, grassroots, and nongovernmental organizations, to create positive outcomes for Target guests, employees, investors, and the community at large.

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