

Excerpt from *Dear Sisters, Dear Daughters*—

a book published by the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession and the ABA Commission for Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession

Dear Sisters, Dear Daughters,

When I was a young girl in south Texas, as a daughter of Mexican immigrant parents, I never met a Latina attorney because there were so few then, but I knew I wanted to be one. It was not until my senior year of college that I met a Latina lawyer who became a professional mentor and good friend to this day. Growing up during the heyday of the civil rights movement, I yearned to be part of the legal system that brought justice equally to everyone in this country. That was my original inspiration to be a lawyer.

I write this letter to share a few pearls of wisdom, advice, and insights I have learned along the way. It is hard to believe that it has been 20-plus years since I began practicing law. While some lessons are best learned through experience, to make the journey easier, it is always wise to listen to those who previously crossed those paths you are traveling now and will travel as you advance in your career.

1. *Believe in yourself.* When in doubt, believe in yourself. Listen to the little voice that tells you you can do the task that is coming up (e.g., client presentation, opening statement, or arguing a motion). You did not get through law school on charm and good looks. No one does. If you need reinforcement, call a friend or experienced mentor to have a practice run through of your event and graciously accept constructive comments. Trust your judgment. After some experience, you will feel more confident in your own abilities.

2. *Find a mentor or more.* Some mentors will help you with work and professional advice in your career. Others will provide guidance of a more personal or social nature. Be open-minded about the mentors you select. Not all should be of your same background or gender. You should hear from other perspectives. Choose mentors that have your best interests at heart.

3. *Plan job changes and transitions.* Most lawyers now do not stay in the same job they took right out of law school. To find a good next job, expect and plan to search for six months to one year to find a good fit. Do not switch jobs just for a change of scenery, but look for a job that is a good match for your long-term career plans if at

all possible. As you are searching, ask yourself the following questions: Ideally, what do I want to be doing professionally and personally in five years, 10 years, 15 years, etc.? How does this job or position fit into that career plan? Is it a career stepping-stone? Rabbit trail? Other?

If circumstances force you to take a job that is not ideal, make the best of it and approach it as a means to an end as you look for another. Do well in each job you hold, and remember that excellent job references are important throughout your career. Always be professional and do not burn bridges behind you, because it could negatively affect your future employment prospects.

As you transition from one job to another, you should also keep in mind the consequences, such as change of benefits in health insurance and retirement plans. The choices you make could seriously impact your taxes and retirement plans along the way. If you do not fully understand COBRA and rolling over a 401(k) plan, talk to a financial planner or fellow lawyer who can help you figure this out before you transition to the next job. This advice may even help you negotiate the terms you want for your subsequent position.

4. *Remember, family and life happen.* Career goals and five-year plans are great, but be prepared when life throws you an unexpected surprise, like an illness or the death of a loved one or colleague. These are the times that try you, and you should learn to be flexible and tough. Have a solid support system of family, friends, and colleagues to help you through these rough patches. We all take turns, and you should be there for your support system members when they go through theirs. Also, being strong in my spiritual life has always helped me get through trying times, but I try to leave my own religious beliefs outside the workplace so as not to offend others who may be of another faith.

5. *Be active in bar associations.* I am a bar junkie. One of my favorite mentors, the judge for whom I clerked, highly recommended to all his law clerks that we get involved in bar associations. He was so right! For years I have been involved locally, regionally, and nationally with various voluntary bar associations, including the ABA, Hispanic National Bar Association, Federal Bar Association, etc. For a young lawyer, bar associations provide professional networking, potential mentors, pro bono experience, and substantive seminars. They also give you an opportunity to develop and showcase your organizational and leadership skills to other leaders in your profession and community. Do not overextend yourself in outside and civic activities, but do get out of your office periodically and get involved in your community.

6. *Protect your name and professional reputation.* Always protect and maintain your professional reputation and integrity, especially in the community where you practice. It is easier to maintain your professional and personal reputation than to try to clear it up later. Your reputation is your most valuable asset as a lawyer. Be mindful of your ethical duties and responsibilities at all times, not just at work. Many young lawyers and law students set up Internet Web sites and virtual entries, not realizing or appreciating the consequences. Employers and potential employers also have access to that information. Any comments or photographs in a compromising position in cyberspace may come back to haunt you later in your professional life.

7. *Make time for yourself.* Try to work out regularly and develop interests outside your work, like gardening, yoga, antiques, and so on. Developing outside interests always helps you relieve stress, and your networking circle increases outside the attorney channels. Make time for your annual physical checkup. You can only perform well as a professional if you are well in mind and body. Periodically, take a long weekend or week to do a personal spiritual checkup. I always try to take an annual short spa vacation around my birthday to reevaluate my career and personal goals with as few interruptions as possible from work. Leave the laptop behind. Do not take it camping or to the beach. You will come back refreshed and reenergized after you have had a chance to recharge yourself personally. Balancing both work and personal life will be a challenge for most attorneys throughout their careers.

8. *Pay it back.* None of us got to where we are today on our own. There were many good mentors, professors, and friends along the way. You too should try to mentor younger sisters and friends coming up behind you. Pay it back. It is only then that you will appreciate and realize how blessed you are in your own life and career. Serving as a mentor yourself is a very rewarding role for a young lawyer.

I try to remind myself daily that I am truly privileged to be an attorney, my chosen profession. As a woman of color, I realize I am one of a select few in this country. Because of my profession and background, I can make a beneficial contribution in my work, personal and family life, but I will not be in a position to do so if I do not maintain a positive attitude. I feel I have a responsibility as a lawyer and Latina to help others who are less privileged and to work to make this country and my community a place that is more hospitable and just toward all. Best of luck and success in your career paths. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Juanita C. Hernández