

Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Chief David Santiago, 9/16/22

- John Caher: Welcome to Amici, news and insight from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher.
- For this Diversity Dialogue segment, I'm pleased to welcome Chief David Santiago, although I'm tempted to call him David Santiago the "first," because his career has been a series of historic "firsts." Chief Santiago, a court officer since Bill Clinton was president and Mario Cuomo was governor, was repeatedly the first Hispanic in several roles as he climbed his way up the ladder. He was a first person of color and first Latino in Suffolk County to become a sergeant and a lieutenant and a captain and a major and now chief. So for this Hispanic Heritage Month edition of Diversity Dialogues, I'm honored to welcome to the program Chief David Santiago, The First!
- Chief, thank you so much for coming on the program. I know your family came to New York from Puerto Rico. When and why?
- Chief Santiago: My mom came to the United States back in the late '60s. She moved because her sister was already in the United States, but she settled in in Ohio. She moved to New York when I was about two years old, around 1973.
- John Caher: So where did you grow up?
- Chief Santiago: In New York, on Long Island pretty much for the most part. She settled on Long Island back in that time, and we moved from house to house in the beginning. But for pretty much for my whole life, I've been on Long Island in Suffolk County.
- John Caher: So as a child, was your Puerto Rican heritage important to you, to your family?
- Chief Santiago: Absolutely, the music, the food, the family. I have a large family, four brothers, two sisters. A big part of our culture is ingrained into us from a young age.
- John Caher: Did your neighborhood have other people of Puerto Rican backgrounds or Hispanic backgrounds?
- Chief Santiago: Yeah, most of the neighborhoods I grew up in, they were mostly minority neighborhoods, so I grew up in a very diverse culture and diverse neighborhood. Even throughout my schooling, my high school and my junior high school was very diverse.
- John Caher: What do you wish people better understood about Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican population?
- Chief Santiago: I remember the years that everyone thought that Puerto Ricans were immigrants, so to speak, whereas we've had citizenship for so many years. We're basically considered one of America's last colonies and we're American

citizens by nature. Some people sometimes confuse that and believe that we're not real American citizens.

John Caher: Very real. In fact, I think you're fully eligible to run for president, are you not?

Chief Santiago: Yes, that's true.

John Caher: Well, this is your opportunity to announce your candidacy!

Chief Santiago: Uh, no! On that same topic, Puerto Ricans have fought alongside Americans and they even had their own regiments and their own companies that fought in every war that America has fought in.

John Caher: I'm sure. Now, who are your early role models in heroes?

Chief Santiago: It was difficult. There weren't many Puerto Ricans on TV or Puerto Rican superheroes, so to speak. So my older brothers, I looked up to them and basically just had to really invent my own type of people. My mom obviously was a big influence in my life and I looked up to her work ethic and how she always wanted to succeed in everything that she did.

John Caher: So your mom was a great role model and you mentioned her work ethic. What do you mean by that?

Chief Santiago: Well, she never sat still. If she wasn't doing something around the house, she was always ... she used to babysit children as kind of a side job to be able to earn extra income. With seven mouths to feed, it was a little difficult on her and growing up in a single parent household was difficult for her to provide for all of our needs.

John Caher: Now, were you always interested in law enforcement?

Chief Santiago: Probably later in my high school life. After having a few interactions with law enforcement myself, it kind of sparked an interest in me. Since high school, I definitely knew I wanted to join law enforcement and I went into college to take criminal justice and explore all the careers within law enforcement and I just started taking all the civil service exams that were law enforcement-related.

John Caher: Now, you mentioned interactions with law enforcement. What did you mean by that?

Chief Santiago: Well, being young and being in a predominantly minority neighborhood, interactions with the police were quite common. I remember being 16 and starting to drive my own car to high school. There were several times where you would just get pulled over. You would have some bad, some good interactions with the police department. So it always sparked an interest in me.

John Caher: Now, what attracted you to a career as a New York State Court Officer rather than another law enforcement agency?

Chief Santiago: I actually just took the court officer exam on a whim. I saw the job description. I believe at that time it was in The Chief newspaper and it said that it was primarily a nine to five job, no weekends, no holidays. I kind of like the idea. I was going to start a family and I knew that this job would be the best for me in terms of not having to work rotating shifts or overnights or be away from my family for too many hours. I found the court system to be fascinating and to be a part of the court system was always a dream of mine, too. Being able to listen to court cases and even what you see on TV may not translate into real life, but it just sparked that interest in me to definitely want to find out what it was all about, so to speak.

John Caher: Now, some of our listeners may not realize that court officers are police officers, not security guards. So tell me what it is that court officers do. We have I think a couple thousand of them in the court system. What do these police officers in the court system do?

Chief Santiago: There's a distinction in the Penal Law between a "police officer" and a "peace officer." Technically, by law we are peace officers, so we have almost every power that a police officer has within our special duties, which include everything that a police officer does out on the street. We make arrests. We have the Penal Law power to do search and seizure, to execute warrants, to search prisoners. But our job duties vary even from court to court. In some of the criminal court parts, you may be assigned to prisoner details where you're moving prisoners to and from a courtroom before the judge. In other instances you may provide security for a jury.

In all courthouses, court officers are there providing security and screening individuals who come into the courthouses, making sure that our courtrooms operate safely and effectively and screening for weapons coming into our court buildings.

John Caher: I understand. Since I can tell you are not a hundred years old, your appointment as first sergeant, first lieutenant, first captain, first major, first chief of Latino heritage in Suffolk County were relatively recent events. Why did it take so long?

Chief Santiago: I just think it was just similar to my situation. I didn't even know what a court officer was. I didn't know what the job entailed. I think it's mostly ... back then it was more of an issue as far as recruitment and getting the word out there as to what the job of a court officer entails and how it's a terrific career opportunity. I think there weren't enough qualified candidates at that time. When I came out to Suffolk County in 1999, there were only a handful of minority court officers, so it was just kind of the way things played themselves out. But it's definitely gotten a lot better and we've made great strides.

John Caher: You mentioned earlier about your mother's work ethic and you have certainly risen through the ranks step-by-step-by-step. Is the secret of your success the work ethic you inherited from your mother?

Chief Santiago: Absolutely. I think my faith also plays a part in that. I've always believed in my faith and my faith helping me throughout my life and just having that moral and ethical standard that allows you to work hard and work as though everything you do matters and that you can make a difference in every single thing that you do.

John Caher: Beautifully said. Now, what does it say to you, what does it say to the Latino community, that those benchmarks have been achieved? That people can look to the court system and they can see someone like you?

Chief Santiago: It's super important because even out here, now that I'm more in a supervisory role, I spend a lot of time mostly behind the scenes, but being out front, being one of the first faces that people see, especially in the Hispanic community and Latino community, that so many individuals come into our buildings and don't speak English, and when they can see a face that resembles theirs they would oftentimes know I spoke Spanish before they even spoke to me. So they would oftentimes approach me and then ask me if I knew Spanish in Spanish, and when I respond to them in Spanish, you would see on their face that they are so relieved that someone was able to communicate with them.

John Caher: I can understand how that would be so important. Now, I know you're active in the Latino Court Officer Society. What does the organization do?

Chief Santiago: It's mostly a fraternal organization. It's increasing awareness as to the Latino community, trying to increase diversity within the court system, and also doing charitable deeds and just basically trying to organize and basically stay united.

John Caher: Now, offline we discussed the difference between "Latino" and "Hispanic," and I know the "Latino Judges Association" was once the "Judges of Hispanic Heritage." Can you sort that out for me? What's the difference between the two terms and why does it matter?

Chief Santiago: Originally everything was "Hispanic" until people started to dive more into the history of the phrase and the term Hispanic and what it actually means. It oftentimes just referred to anyone who spoke Spanish, and it was kind of limiting to say that someone was Hispanic because it would be tied down to a geographical area, whereas the term Latino was more encompassing where it referred to geographically anyone from Central or South America and the Caribbean. So, it kind of broadened the scope of the phrase and allowed more inclusivity. It just kind of basically included more people as Spanish speaking countries can be from different races, many different colors, many different shades we come in and it's that concept of inclusivity that I guess brought that change about.

John Caher: I see. So Spanish speaking doesn't mean you're from Spain.

Chief Santiago: Correct. Yes.

John Caher: The same way that English speaking doesn't mean you're from England.

Chief Santiago: Correct. Yes. Yeah, similar.

John Caher: Now, Latino is a masculine noun. Why not Latinx? Why do you use "Latino" rather than "Latinx?"

Chief Santiago: "Latinx" is also another term that is also gaining traction, and I think that's a phrase that is going to become more and more common as the LGBTQ community has also joined in terms of finding a phrase that was more inclusive to everyone; "Latinx" would make something more gender neutral. So I think someone who may be binary or may not want to be identified as male or female would use the phrase "Latinx." It's difficult because in a Spanish language almost everything is assigned a gender. Even a chair, for instance, can have a male or female connotation. So it's like everything in the Spanish language is assigned a gender. That's just the way it's always been.

John Caher: Now, do you celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month in your home?

Chief Santiago: Yes, every year, in fact, here in the court system as well, and especially in Suffolk County, we have taken part in Hispanic Heritage Month every single year. My district Administrative Judges, over the last four or five that I've had, all would put together a committee in terms of planning for Hispanic Heritage Month celebration, which we've done here in Suffolk every year since it's become an official designation, and it's been something that I'm proud to be a part of in terms of increasing diversity, increasing awareness, and exposing my fellow court members to the Latino culture.

John Caher: Beautiful. So if a young person aspires to follow in your footsteps, let's say someone in high school, what's your advice? How do they get started? How do they even get there?

Chief Santiago: First, you definitely want to keep your nose clean. That would be my first recommendation. You want to choose your friends wisely as to the types of individuals that you hang out with or spend time with. It's having that work ethic, it's about keeping your nose clean and then just working hard for everything, believing that you can do things despite the fact that other people may say, "You're too small, you're too short, you're too young, you're too this, you're too that." It's just about knowing what you want and not stopping. Despite the fact that people may say you can't, you just continue to pursue your goals, and to set goals. Each step of my career, I've done exactly that. It's to set my next goal and try to keep myself motivated to continue pressing and moving forward.

John Caher: That is wonderful advice. Chief, thank you so much for your time, and thank you so much for your service.

Chief Santiago: Thank you. Thank you again. It's been a pleasure.