NYLJ/RICK KOPSTEIN

Judge Jenny Rivera

Q&A

By John Caher

Q: Why did you become a lawyer?

A: joined the legal profession because I wanted to help people. I was attracted to the idea of working within our democratic system to address inequality and injustice. I was quite young when I set my sights on becoming a lawyer, although in reality I did not know much about what a lawyer did. I did not personally know any lawyers and what I knew I generally learned from television, which we all know is a terrible source of information about the demands of legal practice. However, I do think the TV characters, even if not fully formed or defined, tried to represent a lawyer's aspirations to ensure justice for the client.

Q: Why did you choose a career in academia?

A: I developed an interest in teaching when I was a law student, but I wanted to develop my skills as an attorney and then bring the lessons of practice into the classroom. So I spent my first years out of law school as a public interest lawyer, and then pursued a career in teaching law. I found the role of a law professor tremendously professionally satisfying, especially at CUNY Law School, where I spent the majority of my years in academia, and where the faculty helped prepare the next generation of public interest lawyers. I learned a great deal from my students, which in turn made me a better teacher. I dare say the majority of teachers will confirm how extraordinarily enriching and humbling it is to stand before a class of

students as they work through complex analytical problems.

Q: What drew you to the bench?

A: It is a professional dream to sit on the Court of Appeals, working through complex legal issues and writing opinions on cases in a variety of subject areas. It is public service of the highest order, and the work is intellectually challenging and meaningful.

Q: What have you discovered about the court or your new colleagues that has surprised you?

A: I did not realize how much the staff at the Court of Appeals is like a family, celebrating one another's successes and supporting each other during difficult times. They gave me a very warm welcome and made me feel at home.

Q: What do you want to achieve on the court?

A: As with every professional endeavor I have ever undertaken, my goal is to do an excellent job. I also keep in mind that our decisions impact individuals, and that the practical implications of our opinions are very real, and do not merely reflect abstractions about justice.

Q: What can you share with us about the process that led to your appointment to the Court of Appeals

A: The appointment process was extensive and demanding—exactly what we should expect in order to ensure that the legal profession has done a thorough and exhaustive vetting of candidates. Over the course of several weeks after the Commission on Judicial Nominations issued its list of candidates to the governor, I interviewed with members of several bar associations, who represented different sectors of the legal profession and communities throughout our state. They asked questions about my preparedness to serve on the bench,

FOR HIS FIRST nomination to the Court of Appeals, Gov. Andrew Cuomo made an atypical nomination in choosing **JENNY RIVERA**, a professor at the City University of New York School of Law. Though she had an extensive background in academia her lack of litigation experience led to a challenging hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

But Rivera weathered the storm and was confirmed by the full Senate on Feb. 11, 2013. The judge has now settled in her new role, with a series of opinions and dissents over the past 11 months that reveal an affinity for the underdog, a skepticism of government power and a commitment to individual rights.

The daughter of a Puerto Rican mother who came to New York in search of a better life in the 1940s, Rivera grew up in a tenement and helped pay her Catholic high school tuition by working in a towel factory. She won a scholarship to Princeton and went on to receive a J.D. from New York University School of Law and her LL.M. from Columbia University School of Law.

Rivera clerked for then Southern District Judge Sonia Sotomayor, who now sits on the U.S. Supreme Court, before beginning her career in academia. She also worked for the Legal Aid Society's Homeless Family Rights Project and the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund before taking a leave of absence to serve as special deputy attorney general for civil rights under then Attorney General Cuomo.

Rivera, 53, was an administrative law judge for the New York State Division for Human Rights, and also served on the New York City Commission on Human Rights. At CUNY, she founded and served as director of the law school's Center on Latino and Latina Rights and Equality.

including how my work experience might affect how I approached cases, they asked about the issues raised in my scholarship, and what I viewed as the greatest challenge to a transition from legal education to the judiciary. The questions were thoughtful and challenging.

Q: How is your perspective reflected in your opinions?

A: I think each of us brings a perspective to the court that reflects our unique professional experiences. In my opinion, these different perspectives enrich the deliberative process.

Q: Do you feel an obligation to encourage other Latinas to join the legal profession and the judiciary?

A: From my own experience, I know that students are encouraged by seeing and knowing individuals in professional positions who share their life experiences and background. The legal profession lags behind other professions in terms of its diversity, broadly defined. To the extent that I can assist efforts by the American Bar Association and New York State Bar Association to encourage individuals from our diverse communities to pursue a legal education and join the legal profession, I am committed to doing so.

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