

Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Sgt. Bernice Torres

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insights from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

I'd like to welcome to Diversity Dialogues Sergeant Bernice Torres, a court officer in Binghamton. We'll be talking with Sergeant Torres about her Puerto Rican heritage, her childhood in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, a midlife career change that made her a court officer and her extracurricular accomplishments as a handball player who played for the US team and competed in the world championships, and as an artist. And we'll also challenge her to support her favorite line, which is "Serving as a court officer is the best law enforcement job there is."

Sergeant, thanks for coming on Diversity Dialogues.

So, your parents came to the mainland from Puerto Rico, raised you and your siblings in the projects of Bed-Stuy. What early lessons did you learn from them and from your surroundings, your environment?

Sgt. Torres: Well, thank you John for having me. That's a great question. I was raised in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Tompkins projects to be exact. Pretty rough neighborhood coming up. My dad was a hard worker. My mom was a stay home mom, raising us and doing their best. We were pretty poor, but they did their best. We never lacked food and on Christmas, we definitely had a couple of gifts. They did their best.

The lessons I've learned from them, well, my dad wasn't so much the disciplinary one. That was my mom, but he definitely was, "Hey, you can always try better and if this is what you're going to be, whether it's a dishwasher or a cashier, be the best you can be in that field." So he kind of taught me from that young age to just really try my hardest and really try to do my best and be good at what I do. I remember bringing maybe an A to him and he's looking at it and saying, "Oh, that's great, but there's always room for an A-plus."

My mom, she'll give the shirt right off her back. And everybody knew "Ms. Angie" in the projects and she just took in anybody that needed help. She just was such a giving person, very strong personality. She was a farm girl in Puerto Rico with 13 brothers and sisters and she was one of the older ones, so she took care of a lot of her siblings. So she was the

disciplinary one. And yes, I was scared! I never cut class once, not because I didn't want to, but because I was scared of my mom!

So it was great— the work ethics and my surroundings, family and the culture. My parents are both from Puerto Rico and I'm so grateful that they spoke Spanish to us constantly as we grew older. I regret that I did not do that with my kids. My first language was always English but I'm very grateful that my parents did speak Spanish to us and showed us this culture and Puerto Rican food, Latin music. We grew up listening to salsa. I'll tell you, from when I was three my mom put me in front in the living room dance, and she was an ex-mambo dancer. She would compete. So my parents danced a lot and I just love music. So that culture and that environment growing up just kept that vibe of knowing who I am, where it came from.

John Caher: When and why did your parents come to New York from Puerto Rico?

Sgt. Torres: Well, I bet it's very similar to a lot of people who felt New York had some better opportunities. In Puerto Rico, even though it's part of the United States, there's some struggles with jobs and everything else depending on the government there. So it's just tough. And they came out here very young. They actually met over here. They didn't meet in Puerto Rico. My dad had a factory job and my mom was working there and they met and they got together and got married. They were just seeking a better lifestyle. It was kind of tough.

Growing up in the projects, it wasn't easy. Like I said, it was poverty and my mom did what she could to keep me in private school. I have a sister and I had a niece that she raised, and I also had another sister that had cerebral palsy and she was in a group home because my mom always was very sickly. It was tough to take care of her. Being in that kind of neighborhood, and some of the public schools were so tough, so she did what she could with my dad. I went to Catholic school; my sister did as well for a little bit too.

John Caher: It seems like you learned different major lessons from your parents. From your father. It seems like you learned to strive, to always strive to be better. And from your mom, you learned actions have consequences. Is that right?

Sgt. Torres: Yes. And though she had a very kind heart, she was tough. She was a protector too. So it's just a little bit of everything.

John Caher: That's great. What was your very first job?

Sgt. Torres: Hmm. It was definitely McDonald's. I remember I was 14 years old, right in Brooklyn, not far from home. And it was great just getting my first paycheck. I think it was like \$3 an hour back then. I'm showing my age now!

John Caher: And what lessons did you learn going to work that young, at 14 years old?

Sgt. Torres: Knowing that you have to work and earn your money and, regardless what you were doing, to have goals. I could purchase things that I wanted because we just didn't have money like that. This sounds horrible, but one of the things I learned is that I didn't want to work in McDonald's for the rest of my life. You dealt with a lot of different people, and then it was hard, hard work, but either way, I was still happy that I had a job and I earned my own money.

John Caher: And then what did you do when you graduated from high school?

Sgt. Torres: Well, so I went to community college, LaGuardia in Queens. I didn't finish because I also moved out on my own, not because I was forced to. It was more of an independence thing. I feel like some of the Latin culture, the moms, the parents, they do a lot for their kids. My mom didn't teach us how to cook and do our own laundry. She just wanted to do everything for us.

I had an opportunity to move out on my own at 19 while I was going to college, and I did that, just to be more independent, and maybe to get out of the projects. So I moved into a little place over not far from Park Slope. And it was nice, just being on my own. The problem with that was that I was going to school and I was working and I chose the job over the school to pay my bills.

John Caher: Was that your job with what is now the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities?

Sgt. Torres: No, that came just shortly after. I had a job working for a hardware store, and then I had a check cashing job, and then eventually I went and took a civil service exam to get into the state job, which was that.

John Caher: You were there for, I think, 18 years. It's now called the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities. I don't think it was called that when you were there, but what did you do there?

Sgt. Torres: Well, I started as a developmental aide, like a direct care aide, I believe that was the title. My first group home was all wheelchair-bound people,

which was very tough. But yet I really loved the job and working with people that just don't have family. They leave them there and they don't come and visit, some of them or most of them. And we were their family. So a lot of holidays were spent just taking them to different places. And I really did enjoy that job. And again, my sister had cerebral palsy, and ironically when I was young and we would go visit her, I was afraid of people with disabilities, and I would run away. I was just so scared. And then I wind up getting a job, helping them and working with them. So speak about how life turns around for you!

But then I went ahead and took a test and got promoted to supervisor, and I was able to run a group home. And I did that for a while, which again, I enjoyed. It's just something to see when you come into the house and they're yelling your name with such happiness. "Bernice is here!" And that was the kind of relationship I had. Now these people, when I was supervising in another group home, they weren't wheelchair bound, so they can walk and there were like five ladies and we did a lot of stuff with them and worked on a lot of short-term goals and long-term goals, they're still trying to learn a lot of things. I really enjoyed that. That was very interesting to me, that type of job.

John Caher: So it sounds like you were following your father's advice, which is always strive to do better, right?

Sgt. Torres: Yes. Always.

John Caher: And that led to your promotion?

Sgt. Torres: Yes. Yes, it did.

John Caher: Now, what made you think of becoming a court officer at this point? I mean, you've been in the working world in the state for 18 years. Did you wake up one day and say, "Why don't I think about being a court officer?" How did that happen?

Sgt. Torres: Well, I got to say I didn't hear too much of it, but I did have a friend of mine who played handball, and she was just retiring and she spoke about the job, and I was very intrigued by all the great things she had to say about it. And then eventually I saw the test for it, so I took it. I passed it, but I didn't hear from it for a while.

Unfortunately, I was going through a divorce and right around that time I was living in Queens, I was just feeling really, really bummed out about this whole divorce thing. And at this time now, I had a son and a

daughter, and I was just praying. I said, "God, just get me out of here. Open up another door. Because even though I loved this job, it's just didn't pay enough for a single mom." And lo and behold, I get an envelope and here's the courts asking if I'm interested in the academy. I'd never heard of Binghamton, and I never passed Westchester, like a lot of the New York City people, but I went to the academy and that's how I wound up in Binghamton. I didn't know anything about Binghamton.

John Caher: Let's talk about the academy. So, I know you're an athlete, and we'll get into that in a moment, but I'm wondering how you, in your thirties, stacked up against mostly a bunch of probably early twenties men in the academy?

Sgt. Torres: Yeah, so they give you some time, and that's what I love about the academy. They do tell you, "Hey, these are the things you're going to need to do and be ready for." And again, with the background of what my parents instilled —you have to be ready and don't be a slouch—I trained and being an athlete, that helped. And also, I used to box. So a lot of those things helped me keep fit and just stand up against and fit in with the rest of the crew. I think I did well. I think I did very well in the academy as a female in my late thirties. I felt pretty good about that.

John Caher: Now, how in the world did you end up in Binghamton?

Sgt. Torres: It was one of these things where they tell you, "Hey, okay, the academy is going to be upstate." And I was like, "Wow, I don't really want to go upstate because this is all I know, New York City." But I really wanted the job and I needed it. So, they give you choices. And I was going to go with the Fourth Judicial District, and a friend of mine, a good friend of mine, said, "Well, you know that the Fourth goes all the way up to close to Canada, so you better be careful if you want to still travel down to the city." And so I went for the Sixth and I got it.

John Caher: So basically it's where the opportunity arose?

Sgt. Torres: Yes, yes, absolutely.

John Caher: Now your District Executive. [Porter Kirkwood](#), who has been on this program and who is Black and Italian, has spoken of the difficulty in recruiting a diverse workforce in the Sixth Judicial District. I mean, you've got 10 counties, most of them quite rural, plus the city of Binghamton. What do you think it says to have people like yourself working in the 6th JD?

Sgt. Torres: That's a great question. When I first got here, there wasn't many people of my culture and it was more of a culture shock for me. So I am definitely one of these people that likes to say to myself, "What can I do to make a difference?" And I got involved with recruiting for the New York State Courts as a court officer, and I figured let's get the word out because it was a great feeling being Hispanic and being a court officer and being here. But I saw the challenge that there wasn't a lot of diversity with the courts. And so I went out and I started doing a lot of recruiting. And what I found was people just did not know of the job. In fact, I heard someone say, "Well, this is the best kept secret." And I said, "No, let's not keep this a secret. This is a great opportunity for people and they have to know."

So I got out there and I did a lot of recruiting. My co-worker, Officer Matt Tallon, jumped on and I trained him, and now he's taken over the recruiting. He's doing a great job with it. We continue to reach out to colleges, job fairs, and just spread the word. And as a female, a Latin female, I feel great because I can't tell you how many times I've been to some of these colleges and they see me as a 5'1" Hispanic female, and they're like, "Wow, look, hey, she can do it. Come on, let's get on her line. Let's see what this is about. We may have a great opportunity here for us as well." Today I can say the 6th JD is a little more diverse from when I started.

John Caher: Are you fluent in Spanish?

Sgt. Torres: Yes, thanks to my parents.

John Caher: There must be times when someone who speaks primarily Spanish comes to court — and coming to court for anyone in the best of circumstances is a stressful situation—and it must be helpful for them to be able to converse with you?

Sgt. Torres: Yes, we connect immediately. "Are you Spanish? Do you know Spanish?" And I'll tell them "absolutely" in Spanish and say, "How can I help you?" You see the relief immediately with them. No one usually comes to court happy and there's a lot of struggles and nervousness and so on. And right from the beginning, if someone could help or understand, then that's already a relief for them.

John Caher: What's the greatest compliment or most memorable experience you've had to date as a court officer?

Sgt. Torres: The former Administrative Judge told my dad and some judges "I feel safe when she's in the courtroom." That one threw me off. I've had judges come up to me and said, "I love when you are in the courtroom, and I feel you have the greatest control and I feel safe." And that is a great compliment to a court officer.

John Caher: That is a wonderful compliment. Now most of us, both in the court system and out of the court system, are aware of incidents where court officers save lives, where they diffuse bad situations. But we will never be aware of things that didn't happen because you were there, things that you prevented by your presence, things that you may have prevented by your demeanor. Can you talk to that a little bit? Someone walks into the courtroom, courthouse, how do you behave to them? How do you interact with them?

Sgt. Torres: I feel very happy to say that I was part of a court officer pilot I developed with Judge [Seth] Peacock here. We are the first one people see when they come into the building and need to be welcoming and ready to help. Whether it's just demeanor or saying, "Hey, how can I help you?" and just be welcoming and warming. That's very important.

When people come into court, here's the thing, they're either going to lose their freedom, their money or their children. There's no happiness there. Very seldom you have a wedding or adoption. So this is what we constantly come across. Now, we are not going to take things personally. You might get a disgruntled person or someone whose mind is not there. They're worried. This is what we have to understand. They're not mad at us and we're not making them worry. They have these problems that are happening and all they want is direction, some sort of help. And even if they're not asking for it in a great way, we can overlook that and have the understanding and the compassion to know that this individual is coming in with some hardcore problems in their head and they just need to get through their day. And that's where we come in as court officers. I want them to feel comfortable that they can ask me for any kind of help. We're there to help. So that's the goal.

John Caher: Yeah, it's interesting how that would travel up the ladder. So, if someone comes to court and they encounter a court officer and the court officer does something to aggravate their stress and make them angrier, that's probably going to play out with clerk. It's probably going to play out with a judge. It's going to make everybody have a bad day.

Sgt. Torres: Yes. That's so true, and that's why we want to make sure it starts from the minute they come in, that level of understanding. Even if they're a

little bit more upset, we still try to keep them relaxed a little bit and we can try to show them that we're just here to help.

Obviously, it trickles up that way, but it can also trickle down. If there's a bad back-and-forth with the judge and the litigant doesn't like what they're hearing, they're upset in the hallway and we have to go and talk to them, and hopefully we can put them more at ease. So yes, it works both ways and we play a big part in trying to maintain that calmness and try to understand.

Showing compassion to the public, in my experience, has helped because I can't tell you how many times people have gotten very upset and I can just talk to them and say, "I understand how you feel. How can I help you get to where you need to go?" Or, "Do you need some water?" Whatever it is, to show them that I'm being compassionate and understanding that they're feeling that way.

John Caher: You have a tendency to tell people that you've got the best law enforcement job possible.

Sgt. Torres: Oh yeah!

John Caher: Why is that?

Sgt. Torres: Well, it was one of my greatest lines when I was recruiting, and I love when people would say, "What are you talking about? You better prove it. You better tell me what you're talking about."

And I'd say, "Well, I respect all law enforcements and all departments, and it's not an easy job, but we have the best law enforcement job." Nine to five, Monday through Friday, holidays off, weekends off. It's very unusual in any law enforcement job, at least from the very beginning. Maybe in other law enforcement jobs, you might get it down the line, but you absolutely wouldn't get that from the very beginning coming out of the academy.

Although I can never say that our job is super safe because we encounter people that are incarcerated and sometimes there are fights and all that. I'm never going to say it's safe, but it's not like we are walking up to a car on the highway with tinted windows and we don't know who's in there or what's going to pop out of the trunk. So yes, I feel this is the best law enforcement job there is.

I feel like we have the upper hand here a little bit. You're coming in, we screen you, we have metal detectors. We're searching you. I'm not going to say that there aren't times where you're going to roll with someone, but we certainly will try to diffuse.

John Caher: Now you're also quite the athlete. Handball, racquetball, paddle ball. According to the Facebook page of the Paddle Ball Council, you are a handball "legend" turned paddle ball "legend to be" and "super smart out and off the court." So let's unpack this. How and when did you become a handball player?

Sgt. Torres: Oh man, I was 14. I started playing in Queens. My stepsister taught me, and then I just fell in love with it. For handball, all you need is a ball and a wall. It's one of the cheapest sports you can get into. And frankly, if you're from New York City, you'll know that there are walls all over the place. And so not having that much money, I said, "Okay, this doesn't require equipment or anything like that, just the ball in the wall." You buy a ball for a dollar in the bodega and you hit on the wall.

So, I started doing that, and I got older and I was still playing it. I started competing in it. I got very competitive, and lo and behold, there were competitions, tournaments. Then I started playing local tournaments and there was divisions and you become amateur and then you go into pro-level or A-players or however they define you as you win tournaments. So I got involved with that big time, and I competed quite a bit in the early 2000s.

John Caher: And you took it pretty far. You were selected for the US team, played in the world championships.

Sgt. Torres: Yeah, I did. I didn't know that that was an opportunity. And then they call me, there's a handball association, and they even have a Hall of Fame in Arizona, a building there for handball. And they contact me and said, "Hey, would you like to play for the USA team?" And I was like, "YES!"

So my first World tournament was in Portland in '09, and then I played in Ireland again for the World, representing USA in 2012. And then as late as—it might've been 2016 or something like that, or 2017— I was invited to the WBIF, the "Wallball International Federation." They were trying to bring handball to a level of Olympics. They got it as far as the Fed Cup and all that, but never in the Olympics.

And it just so happened that the Olympics people were at the last Worlds in Ireland, and they gave out the medals. And that was probably as close

as I've ever felt receiving a gold medal from somebody from the Olympics. But that was really nice. But I went over and this time when the Wallball International Federation got together and developed their organization, they had asked me to play in it and what country would I represent? And the director from Puerto Rico, their handball club, had contacted myself and my partner that I played with and said, "Would you like to represent Puerto Rico?" And I said, "Yes, I would love to." I felt really proud to do so. And we went to Columbia.

That was interesting. We went with so many other countries and they had a bus full of people from Cuba, Spain, Italy, Japan. These are all people from all countries. And there were buses down to where the tournament was. Interesting enough, we had very heavily armed guards there, so it was very nerve wracking, but they made sure we were safe. So I played for Puerto Rico for the first time, and lo and behold, we won. So that was a great thing.

So those were my experience. Yeah, I mean, I pushed it further than just New York City playing locally. I've played in Vegas. I played for the Red Bull Slaps, the sponsored big ones there like, Mayor's Cup, the Nationals, a lot of these tournaments. When I was playing around when I was young, I had no idea that the sport could have grown like that.

John Caher: That's incredible. Now, you're also a woman of many talents. I know you're an artist. Do you paint? Do you sculpt? What do you do?

Sgt. Torres: Yeah, I paint. I've always drawn cartoons and things of that nature. When I was young, my mom kind of did the same, and she would just draw these little things and she would sit us in bed and say, "Hey, I just scribbled something here and you make something out of it." And so she would expand our mind and get us to draw and create something.

Then one time in college they had a painting course, and I said, "Why not? I like art." And I started doing still life paintings and I fell in love with painting. And then I started creating my own type of painting. And now I work with resin, with pigment powder, and I create a lot of different things. Resin is very beautiful, but you've got to be careful with the torch light and stuff like that. There's a little chemistry going on there. So it's very fun.

John Caher: Great, great. Let's turn back to your heritage, if you don't mind. What should people know about Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans?

Sgt. Torres: Well, it just so happens I just got back from visiting Puerto Rico. We celebrated my dad's 85th birthday out there, and that was a lot of fun. All the family came out. Puerto Rico's just such a beautiful island. And I like to go from time to time to just reconnect with the roots and the culture and the food and the music and the beaches, just to look up and get one your cousins to go grab one of the coconuts up on the palm trees. It's just a beautiful island to just come out and see and enjoy. And as far as the culture, the Puerto Ricans, we're very vibrant people. It's in our genes. The music lives in us in a celebratory ways.

So we have three roots, right? We're African, Spaniards, and Taíno Indian, but that salsa comes from Africa, those bongos and everything. And that was always instilled in the music that I love listening to. So there's a lot of laughter and dancing. We love to dance and listen to that music. It gets us going. There's a proudness. Heck, New York City throws this Puerto Rican parade in June, but Puerto Ricans will put that flag on their car for the whole month, celebrating for the whole month, because that's the proudness we feel.

John Caher: So that's very interesting. I hadn't fully appreciated the blend of cultures that is part of the Puerto Rican DNA. Can you explain how that affected you, how that influenced you?

Sgt. Torres: Yeah. My dad, my mom, if you look at them, their colors are so different, their hair is so different. My dad has more of a Spaniard roots background from the Puerto Rican. As I said, we have the African, the Hispanic, and the Taíno. My mom, even though there was some Indian, the African roots was very strong on her. My great-great-grandfather—this is what was told to me by my mom—was an African slave. But yeah, it's a great mixture and I'm so proud of it.

John Caher: So you're a descendant of a slave?

Sgt. Torres: Yeah, absolutely.

John Caher: What did it mean to the Hispanic community to see Judge Joseph Zayas become the first person of Hispanic heritage ever appointed Chief Administrative Judge?

Sgt. Torres: That's amazing. Just absolutely amazing and a very, very proud moment. A proud time for us as Puerto Ricans to see someone of our culture up there like that. That's such a great achievement. And we're very proud.

It's funny because we have similar backgrounds, being raised in projects. The rough times were there and it's what you make of it. I think it made me stronger. And when I see someone like him do so well, I can connect with that and say, "Hey, you came from the very similar backgrounds, and the struggle is real. And look at you now." Such a proud moment for someone of Puerto Rican descent to be in such a great title. So yeah, there's a super proudness behind that.

John Caher: I'm going to turn that one right back on you. I think someone can look at you and say the same thing.

Sgt. Torres: Thank you, John. That's really nice. Thank you.

John Caher: Will you do anything special to commemorate Hispanic Heritage Month?

Sgt. Torres: I'm an artist, as you said, and I like to take that time and create something from Puerto Rico. I've painted the fort. We have two forts there, and there's some great history about that. There's the rainforest. I like to take something from my culture and maybe some Taíno writings and symbols and display it.

John Caher: What a wonderful way to end. And Sergeant, thank you so much for your time, and thank you so much for your service.