

JORGE CAZARES

Housing Pioneer Displays Loyalty, Passion for Service

by Wendy L. Werner

Jorge V. Cazares of **Pugh Jones & Johnson, PC** has a background and ethic that mirrors the Ignatian code: “a commitment to the issues of social responsibility and justice.” The product of a Jesuit education, Cazares embraces what Ignatius believed. It is imperative to act upon what is learned, to use our values in service to humanity. This is a set of values Cazares has taken to heart.

Born and raised in the Pilsen neighborhood, a predominantly Hispanic community, he attended St. Ignatius College Prep, a revered institution that survived the Great Chicago Fire and one that has graduated a number of well known Chicagoans.

Cazares has always demonstrated a strong work ethic beginning with his first job in grammar school. He worked all of his summers and after school throughout high school, college and law school to help finance his education.

His work schedule prohibited him from playing high school sports, but that did not stop him from participating. He played in various Chicago Park

District tennis, basketball and softball teams and was the president of the Latin American Student Organization at St. Ignatius.

A lifelong sports fan and White Sox and Bulls season ticket holder, his love of competition remains, whether it is the Sox, Bulls, Blackhawks, Bears or the Fire. His idea of the perfect day is in his backyard on a summer day, steaks or hamburgers on the grill, and listening to sports with his friends, family, and the dog.

If the occasion calls for it, he relives his college and law school days by listening to the records and dance mixes he spun at clubs as a DJ.

Accepted at a wide range of colleges, Cazares decided on Yale, the university his brother had attended, worrying that the good weather at Stanford “would be too much of a distraction.” He worked throughout, spending four years in the dining halls at Yale, which he says, “was the best job on campus, we were unionized.”

He worked as a bank teller his first college

summer even though on his first day he was \$100 short. “I was mortified,” says Cazares. “To this day, I am convinced I gave the money to one of the many elderly customers who were always in my line, as word must have gotten out that I was giving away money.” But the bank president trusted him, and he stayed three summers.

The Law First as a Paralegal

Cazares entered college thinking he would attend medical school, but his gradual doubts were clinched junior year when he saw his first cadaver. There was no pre-med major, and he finished college with a biology degree.

One of his college roommates, a pre-law student, went to work at Skadden Arps as a paralegal and made the suggestion that Cazares try it. Ironically, his roommate never went to law school. Cazares accepted the advice and became the first paralegal hired by Altheimer & Gray who didn’t have a paralegal certificate or any prior legal experience.



"I worked in the litigation department and did some real estate. The lawyers kept saying, 'Are you sure you want to do this?' I enjoyed it."

That experience cemented his decision, and he returned to the Jesuits to attend law school at Loyola University of Chicago. After law school, he went back to Altheimer as an associate working in its bankruptcy, insolvency, and work-out department, but decided he wanted to move to a smaller firm.

Getting in on the Ground Floor

He was hired at Pugh Jones & Johnson just months after the firm opened. Cazares interviewed with Walter Jones, Jr. and Stephen Pugh. "They were exciting people who had great experience," he says, "and they were very straightforward."

"What intrigued me was having this fresh start and being on the ground floor with the founders. It was like a buying penny stock, and with the exception of one other memorable opportunity, 22 years later I am still here."

"Almost immediately, Walter had a criminal trial and invited me to second chair in federal court. We tried the case three months after I joined the firm, and he let me argue the appeal before the Seventh Circuit. It was an auspicious beginning."

Six years later he became the first associate promoted to an equity partner. "The partners have a close relationship. I tell the people that we hire that what is most important is who you work with, not simply what the work is that you are doing."

Early on in his career, he was involved in another federal criminal trial that lasted six weeks. "I worked every single day for the duration of the trial. It was a RICO case brought against the president and several of the aldermen of a Chicago suburb, and we represented one of the aldermen. It was totally consuming, but a once-in-a-lifetime experience. You are in court from 9 to 5, and then you come back to the office to prepare for the next day."

General Counsel at CHA

In 2006, Cazares was approached to take on the role of general counsel for the Chicago Housing Authority, the third largest public housing agency in the country. His partners wholeheartedly supported his decision. As the first Latino to serve as general counsel, he oversaw all of the agency's legal affairs and provided advice and counsel to the CHA's Board of Commissioners, senior management and employees.

It was his first experience in a broad supervisory role with a staff of over 50, including more than 20 in-house lawyers who provided legal assistance on real estate and finance transactions involved in creating mixed income communities. The legal department also represented the CHA in litigation matters, ranging from personal injury lawsuits to decades-old federal court consent decrees to providing advice and counsel on compliance with HUD and other regulatory requirements.

In addition, Cazares served as the Chicago Housing Authority's ethics officer in charge of supervising compliance with the agency's ethics policies. He supervised the agency's Office of the Inspector General, investigating fraud and waste of CHA's resources by agency employees, residents or contractors.

He also supervised the agency's ADA/Section 504 compliance department as well as its One-Strike Program, whereby a tenant could be evicted based upon an arrest involving drugs, guns or violent crimes. The program was controversial and heavily contested in the courts. It was a rigorous two years.

As an attorney with no previous experience in the public sector, Cazares initially held sit-down meetings with every single individual under his purview. "I asked them for their resumes, I wanted to learn about their experience, concerns, and ideas. It helped give me a good idea about where we were and where we needed to go."

"We had complicated and sophisticated real estate issues. We were involved in integrating CHA residents into a mixed-income housing environment. We tried to destroy these silos so people in public housing could integrate and interact with a broader population instead of just public housing residents."

"Working at a public agency was eye opening," says Cazares. "There is a perception that public sector employees aren't that bright and don't work that hard. Nothing could have been further from the truth."

"Our managing directors had MBAs from Northwestern and University of Chicago. We had to rely on budgets and appropriations, and sometimes the funding just wasn't there. I had to learn to manage different people and personalities."

Cazares stresses the importance of the legal department in helping prevent lawsuits, exposure and damages. "When I arrived, there was an agency-wide perception that legal held things up when, in fact, the slowdown was in the units. People in the business units wanted to rely on the lawyers to make the decisions for them."

"I wanted to make sure that the legal department and agency understood that our role was to advise the units of outcomes and consequences, as well as any and all options available. We were not the business decision makers."

Reflecting back on his public service experience, Cazares adds, "I may not have enjoyed it as much at the time as I appreciated it after I left. When you are in the fire, you don't always realize just how valuable the experience is."

Cazares also developed ties with his colleagues in other agencies. "I contacted the chief legal officers of the various City of Chicago sister agencies: Chicago Public Schools, the Public Building Commission, the City Colleges of Chicago, the Chicago Park District and the City of Chicago."

"We had guest speakers talk about relevant issues to all of our organizations. I thought it was important for us to have a dialog. It was an opportunity to learn from one another and talk about common issues," says Cazares.

Helping the Firm, Neighborhoods

A change in leadership at the agency brought him back to his law firm, where his partners had indicated that the door would always be open for his return. Cazares has enjoyed being back. "Right now I do quite a bit of litigation, commercial, some real estate, some breach of contract work and breach of lease work—both are about half real estate and non real estate."

His strong commitment to the community

remains. "I am on the board of my son's grammar school, and I was on the board of governors for Loyola University School of Law for about eight years and four years on their diversity committee."

Cazares also served as president of the Loyola University Latino Alumni Board for three years. "We created and endowed three scholarships, two for undergraduates and one for a graduate student."

He is also very involved in the Gads Hill Center, a not-for-profit family resource center established in 1898 that serves predominantly Latino and African American families in the communities of west and southwest Chicago. As a former participant in their programs, he has been on the board for over 10 years and was its board president for two terms. "I know my life was enriched by my experiences, and I want to see other kids have that opportunity."

He is also involved in the Constitutional Rights Foundation that sends lawyers to grammar and high schools to teach constitutional law through a variety of examples. "We help constitutional rights come alive by engaging students in discussion." As if that were not enough, he has judged moot court at law school, and participated in the Chicago Public School "Principal for a Day" program.

Cazares' wife and her family are huge soccer fans and were part founders of one of the city's largest Mexican soccer leagues. When his older son, now a high school sophomore at St. Ignatius, gave up baseball and tried out for the high school soccer team, "she was more nervous than our son." Fortunately for both, he made the team.

Although he was bitten by the golf bug later in life, he doesn't play that often. "We live in the city, so playing a round of golf means a significant excursion. It just takes too much time away from the family, so now I almost always only play in golf outings during the week."

Though his wife and sons, 15 and 12, sometimes wish his work was not so demanding, he believes his children appreciate his academic achievements and the lifestyle his hard work has been able to provide.

As a lawyer, he likes to think of himself as being focused on nuts and bolts. "I am practical and able to see the big picture. I want to make sure I am focused on getting the best outcome for my client, and winning or losing one point isn't necessarily the most important thing." He believes his clients see him the same way.

Among his demonstrated values, he believes his partners would cite his loyalty. "You don't see that as much now," says Cazares. "People move from firm to firm today."

Instead, he has become more invested in his firm. Over the years, he has chaired the conflicts, associate development, and associate compensation committees. He credits his partners Stephen Pugh, the firm's president and Walter Jones, Jr. as being friends, partners, and mentors.

"The fact that I am still here is a testament to them. They are two of the best lawyers I have seen. And I am constantly learning from them. Walter has tried over 100 federal jury trials, and Steve was a member of the Justice Department's strike force. I have been honored to work with them."

And, it appears, to holding tight to those things most important to him. ■