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Dr. Lorenzo Trujillo: Retiring From Colorado Law

Latinos are losing a potent presence in Colorado higher education. The University of Colorado Law School is saluting Lorenzo Trujillo with a farewell gathering today. Since 2004, Trujillo, positioned as the Assistant Dean for Students and Professional Programs, has imagined, implemented and effected changes at the state's law school. Among those changes, as he wrote in an email message to me, are an "increased focus on diversity at Colorado Law and the climate of inclusion and respect."

His bio on the Colorado Law Web site summarizes his official duties. They are at once impressive and intimidating:

Dean Trujillo became the Assistant Dean of Students and Professional Programs at the University of Colorado Law School in 2004. He is the supervising professor of the externship program and teaches Legal Drafting in Spanish for Family Law. He administers Student Organizations (SBA), Law Journals (3), Legal Writing Program, Clinical Education and Clinics, ABA Accreditation, Academic Assistance Program, Moot Courts, Student Fee Committee, Loan Repayment Assistance Program, among other responsibilities.

He has served and serves in numerous professional capacities on committees of the Colorado Supreme Court, The National Endowment for the Arts, and other regional and national agencies of the government, business and public sectors. He

is the Past General Counsel to the National Hispanic Bar Association and past member of the 17th Judicial District Nominating Commission. He is "Of Counsel" with the law firm Sherman and Howard, L.L.C. He has practiced law, consulted, taught, lectured and published concerning matters in education, immigration, family law, business law, language equity, juvenile law, the arts and public policy.

The triumphs during his relatively brief tenure at Colorado Law are numerous. Among what he considers the highlights is the implementation of the Loan Repayment Assistance Program, allowing graduates to pursue public interest careers; rewarding them by alleviating the financial burdens incurred during college and law school. Other considerable coups involve his public policy endeavors. Like his bio, the titles of the public policy exercises seem officious, daunting and even dry to the non-academic (The Trujillo Commission on On-Line Education; Study on the Relationship between Law School and Bar Passage; Clinic and Study on Families and Juveniles and Truancy).

Which is somewhat misleading - Trujillo's personality is anything but daunting or dry.

Behind the formidable bio and titles comprising Trujillo's accomplishments and efforts is a man disarmingly modest. He is unflaggingly loyal to his roots and culture, which likely explains his enduring passion for the holy trinity of the civil rights movement -- justice, opportunity and equality. Not limited to the war waged on segregation and institutionalized discrimination in the Deep South, the battles for those ideals were also fought by Latinos. And while the Bracero programs later gave rise to widespread awareness of Latino struggles and an ensuing pride conscious (Chicano Power), the multigenerational Latinos of Southern Colorado and Northern New Mexico, from which Trujillo hails, resisted poverty and limited resources and expectations for centuries.

When I profiled Trujillo for the Web site *Latino Landscape*, I observed that his life is analogous of the ethnic group's topography. His travels across the Latino landscape are well-documented excursions into a sometimes harsh and often difficult but beautiful terrain. The explorations, along with his subsequent empirical and emotional interpretations, advice and advocacy, has promoted him well beyond being merely an academic analyst of the Latino people and culture. His resume might span the length and scale the summit of mainstream educational possibilities, but Trujillo isn't merely a bookworm chewing through published papers and gaining insight and intellectual nourishment by consuming secondhand studies. His extracurricular activities are inseparable from the professional pursuits, degrees and accomplishments.

The folkloric cadences of Spanish music are as common to Trujillo's syntax as legalese. Musical phrases are more comfortable to the attorney than courtroom diction.

He comes across as an exception to the staid, stuffy and analytical lawyer whose stiff movements Jackson Browne satirized in the 80's music video, "Lawyers In Love," even the somewhat more animated Perry Mason.

The evidence: For starters, he founded the Asociacion Nacional de Grupos Folkloricos and instructed University of Colorado students in the intricacies of Mexican folklorico dance and history. He's served as a grant panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts and performs and lectures on folkloric music and dance across the American Southwest (he's already presented over 2,000 of the lectures/performances to date). Then there is the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts and as a Distinguished Traditional Folk Artist awarded Trujillo by the Premio Hilos Culturales. His latest artistic effort is *From Santa Fe to Denver*, a CD

collaboration with musician El Rodriguez; described as "a semi-classical and contemporary Latino music."

If a dancing attorney seems a stretch or at least a surprise, consider that Trujillo's life and personality are comprised of contradictions and exceptions.

Trujillo contradicts popular perception about Latinos in many forms, but perhaps the most ironic anomaly is his well-rooted placement on not only the Latino landscape, but also the American landscape. Belonging to the 14th generation of a family that resided on American soil before the Mayflower met Plymouth Rock, his ancestors explored the Rio Grand Valley in 1540 alongside Francisco Vazquez de Coronado and permanently settled northern New Mexico over four centuries ago. His familial presence in American upsets the widespread assumption that Latinos are largely a recent and illegal presence in the United States.

Trujillo's professional example also disputes stereotypes and expectations.

Consider the historically dismal Latino performance in formal education. Trujillo shattered even the most optimistic ambitions common to Latinos, earning not only a college diploma but several advanced degrees, including a master's in theater dance and doctorates in both law and education.

And even though the education is formidable, even more impressive is how Trujillo continues to employ the breadth of scholarship in daily activities. He isn't only a counselor of law. In recent years, he's been constantly counseling students, the state legislature and aspiring musicians on everything from curricula to educational strategy to aesthetic artistry.

Even before implementing an ambitious goal to prep and promote a diverse student body at CU's Law School in the post-affirmative action era as Assistant Dean, Trujillo studied and actively agitated for increased opportunities for underprivileged minority youth who are often derailed by low expectations, disengaged parents and poisonous peer pressure.

After years and a dissertation studying at-risk minority youth, Trujillo's expertise became a kinetic force, relied upon by government and communities to confront an overwhelming task -- encouraging that population to graduate college when so many fail to even complete high school. Whether working as Adams County Public School District's in-house counsel, a Task Force member of the Colorado Lawyer's Committee or private practice, Trujillo advised officials and organizations on how to accomplish that elusive goal based on tangible reality rather than abstract theory.

A tangible example of that reality is that artistic expression enhances self-concept and cognitive growth. The subject of his doctorate dissertation in education, Trujillo realized his theory while working with low-achieving students in California and later Adams County Public Schools in Colorado. Artistic and cultural immersion propelled pupils to higher grades and higher education, thus defying stats and dodging bullets that fell many of their Latino peers with similar backgrounds and habits. Music and cultural pride might not be panaceas, but involved entertainment helps pave a precarious path. For Trujillo, affirmative action isn't quotas and handouts. It's actively encouraging excellence. And affirmative artistry is just one example of Trujillo's insights that influence policy makers.

While retiring from Colorado Law, Trujillo isn't bowing out of the workforce. He will return to the law firm of Sherman and Howard as an attorney in the Estate Planning and Business Departments for non-profit corporations. Nor is he abdicating his passions, including the lifelong promotion of equality, opportunity and justice. He will also have more time for a

personal life and hobbies. In addition to his educational, legal and artistic acumen, Trujillo claims considerable expertise in all things related to Latino family and spiritual life. Like all his interests, the expertise results from the confluence of experience and study. He and wife, Ellen Alires-Trujillo, raised three children and now devote a substantial percentage of their personal life to them, their spouses and five grandchildren.

As the farewell gathering where Colorado Law will toast Trujillo approaches; as he prepares to exit academia, I asked for his observations on the Latino presence in the legal profession.

"Hispanic presence in the legal profession is woefully slim. There are not sufficient Hispanic attorneys to meet the needs of Latinos in society to give access to justice and a voice in legal matters and society," he responded via email. "Although Colorado Law is graduating Latino law students, the overall number remains low in comparison to the increased numbers of Latinos in American society."

Writer's Note: Portions of this blog entry appeared in a profile that I wrote on Dr. Trujillo for Latino Landscape.

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