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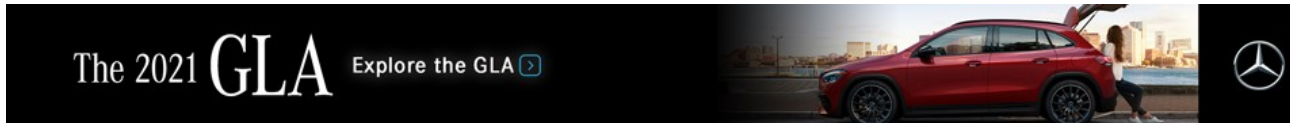
Women in Law: An Interview with Judge Lesley Briones

By Mala Sharma

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In this month's "Women in Law" column, we present an interview with Judge Lesley Briones of Harris County, Texas, Civil Court at Law Number 4.

**Judge Lesley Briones***Courtesy of Judge Lesley Briones*

What motivated you to become a lawyer and now judge?

Growing up on the United States–Mexico border instilled in me a deep respect for the rule of law. Seeing the stark juxtaposition of how the law is applied in the United States versus Mexico impressed upon me the critical need for equality under the law and a justice system free from corruption and bias. This exposure motivated me to become a lawyer because I felt (and still feel) that the law is the best means to advance equality in a civil society. Now, as a judge, I can advance justice each day in my courtroom. I feel a great responsibility to uphold the law with impartiality and fairness, and to treat every litigant equally and with dignity, respect, and empathy. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve and want to dedicate the rest of my career to public service.

What was the biggest challenge you faced in your career, and what achievements are you most proud of?

The biggest career challenge I have faced was the internal struggle of reconciling my passion for social justice with my substantial student loan debt. Upon graduating from Yale Law School, I decided to work at Vinson & Elkins, LLP (V&E), rather than pursue a public-interest position because of this financial reality. While not my original plan, this choice ended up working out better than I could have ever imagined. Not only did I meet my amazing husband, Adán, at V&E, but I also met lifelong mentors and received excellent training, which better positioned me for a future public-interest career. At the age of 30, I left V&E to serve as the general counsel and chief operating officer of a national, multi-billion-dollar private foundation. I am proud that I helped grow the organization from a small Houston start-up to a national philanthropic organization that granted over a billion dollars during my tenure to help improve education, criminal justice, and health care across the United States. I am also proud to be serving our community as a judge, to have been the most highly rated Harris County Civil Court at Law judge in the 2019 Houston Bar Association Judicial Poll, and to have won a highly contested 2020 Democratic primary with 73 percent of the vote.

How do you balance work and personal life responsibilities? What is the best way to manage your career?

The best way to manage your career is to be true to your “why.” My husband, Adán, and our three daughters—Valentina (10), Catalina (6), and Ana Lucía (2)—are my why. Helping others is my why. Advancing equal justice is my why. When I stay focused on my “why,” the 18-hour days become more manageable, as I draw energy from this purpose. I am also able to balance my career because of my faith and my husband, a tremendous partner who supports me 150 percent.

As a female judge and legal trailblazer, what do you feel your role is? What advice would you give to young, female lawyers to succeed in their careers?

As a woman of color, wife, working mother of three daughters, former public-school teacher, and as one of the few Latina judges in our community, I believe my role is to be an example for our youth. My goal is to show our youth that diverse female judges can not only serve, but also thrive—and that our youth can achieve this and so much more. Strong women who came before us paved the way and empowered us, and I believe it is our role to pay it forward. I do this, for example, by accepting every invitation I receive to speak to youth. I also recently became an adjunct professor at the University of Houston Law Center and am thrilled to be back in the classroom.

My advice to junior female lawyers is: Pursue your passions. Be persistent. Be purposeful. Be authentic. Be fearless. Never compromise your integrity. Never tell yourself “no” or believe you are not ready. You are ready. Be all in. You became a lawyer for a reason. Embrace the great responsibilities of this profession, help others, and believe that anything is possible.

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