



FEDERAL BAR ASSOCIATION SOUTH FLORIDA CHAPTER

Interview with the Honorable Rodolfo A. Ruiz II – Interview by Bernardo Pastor

Your rise to the federal bench can be described as meteoric; an interesting one, as well. Tell us how you got here so fast? First and foremost, Bernie, thank you and the FBA South Florida Chapter for taking the time to meet with me and interview me for the FBA Newsletter. We go way back, having worked together at both White & Case LLP and the County Attorney’s Office. So, it is particularly special for me to do this interview with you.



As for my rise to the federal bench, I can sum it up with three principles: hard work, timing, and a lot of luck! My path was paved by tremendous mentors and incredible opportunities. First as a federal law clerk to the Honorable Federico A. Moreno, then as an associate in private practice with White & Case LLP in Miami, and finally as an

Assistant County Attorney in the Miami-Dade County Attorney’s Office—these three pivotal stops put me in a position to join the state court judiciary. At each phase, I was given opportunities to grow and expand my practice and take on new challenges. I was blessed to have supervisors who trusted me and gave me the freedom to problem-solve legal issues for the benefit of my clients. And I was given the chance to get into court early and often at both trial and appellate levels. Once I found myself on the bench as a Miami-Dade County Court judge and later as a Circuit Court judge, I did the same thing I had always done in private practice: seek out opportunities and maximize my experience. I wrote as much as I could in emerging areas of the law to leave a mark on the development of Florida jurisprudence. I presided over as many jury and bench trials as I could, handling both criminal and civil divisions. I sat on appellate panels. And after a few years, the quality and quantity of my experience as a County and Circuit Judge had prepared me for nomination as a District Court Judge for the Southern District of Florida. The path to become a federal judge was not an easy one—in fact, at one point my nomination expired on the Senate floor and

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I had to be re-nominated—but I was blessed to count on the support of individuals both on a local and national level. My confirmation in May 2019 was truly the culmination of years of hard work, timing, and good luck.

To what do you attribute your (rapid) success? I have been blessed with professional opportunities and mentors that have truly shaped my career path. I would not be where I am today without the support of my Judge, Federico Moreno, a brilliant jurist and



mentor who has championed my career in more ways than I can count. In addition, I have the support of wonderful parents and an amazing wife, all of whom have been instrumental in propelling my career forward. Finally, I think there is no substitute for hard work. At the end of the day, because I have been so blessed to do what I love, I have spent hundreds of hours working hard and trying to become the best jurist I can be.

What role did your parents and their exile experience, play in your development as a man and lawyer? My parents' exile experience has played a tremendous role in making me the person I am today. Rodolfo and Carmen Ruiz both escaped Cuba in search of freedom—my father arrived in this country in 1962 via Operation Peter Pan, a mass exodus of over 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban minors to the United States, while my mother arrived five years later in 1967 as part of the Freedom Flights, one of the largest airborne refugee operations in American history. Their harrowing experience and efforts to escape the Castro regime as it began to espouse communist ideology has forever taught me the fundamental importance of the rule of law. They,

along with so many Cubans, found themselves in the grip of a dictatorship and witnessed, first-hand, the suppression of civil liberties and the absence of freedom of speech and of the press. So, it is no surprise that my family's experience has also imprinted upon me the importance of liberty and due process. My parents have served as a lifelong example of what one can achieve in this great country through hard work, perseverance, and determination. They made sure that I understood the greatness of America from an early age and taught me to appreciate the many freedoms we all have as Americans. The oath I took to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States is all the more special because of their exile experience. And to the extent I possess any of the values that make a good judge—integrity, humility, compassion, and courage—it is because my parents taught me these values and what it means to be a good spouse, father, and person.

You are just one of a handful of Cuban-American federal judges; is that significant for you? It is incredibly significant. I am honored to represent my heritage and culture on the federal bench. It is also important for our community to have a diverse judiciary and I am proud to play a part in ensuring that our courts look like America. Moreover, diversity on the bench plays an important part in promoting public trust and ensuring the perception of fairness. It is a point of personal pride to be a Cuban-American on the federal bench, and one that I do not take lightly.

Tell us about any mentors or former colleagues who played a role in your path. I have been truly blessed with selfless mentors and throughout my career. First and foremost, I would not be on the bench were it not for Judge Moreno. I was incredibly fortunate to clerk for him after graduating law school and he has set an example for me throughout my career of what a jurist should be. As he nears his thirtieth anniversary on the federal bench, there is no question his leadership and dedication have left a lasting impact on the Southern District of Florida. He has always understood the importance of maintaining the integrity of the judicial system, and lives and breathes the human dimension of trial work. Judge Moreno has always understood that

justice delayed is justice denied, and I strive to emulate his approach to judging.

As a lawyer, I was fortunate to work at the Miami-Dade County Attorney's Office, where I was mentored by Miami-Dade County Attorney Robert Cuevas Jr. and then-First Assistant Abigail Price-Williams. They were an incredible leadership team at the office and taught me how to successfully represent the Board of County Commissioners and the Office of the Mayor. I also had the opportunity to work alongside numerous members of the Federal Litigation Section, like you, Willy Ferrer, Ed Sanchez, and Craig Leen. As a young Assistant County Attorney, all of these unbelievably talented public servants helped me in and out of the courtroom and took the time to show me how to be an effective and diligent lawyer. I had the privilege of working in the Tax and Finance Section as well with now-Judge Tom Logue on the Third District Court of Appeal, Jorge Martinez-Esteve, Mindy Thornton, and Jim Kracht. It was truly an all-star team of lawyers who took the time to teach me everything from case management techniques to the intricacies of Florida constitutional law.

When I joined the Miami-Dade County Court bench, my run of wonderful mentors and colleagues continued. Judges Sam Slom, Linda Singer Stein, Miriam Lehr, and Andrea Wolfson took me under their wing and taught me how to effectively handle criminal calendars and civil matters. A few years later, I was blessed to work in both the criminal and civil divisions where I learned from Judges Nushin Sayfie, Miguel de la O, Robert Luck, Jacqueline Hogan-Scola, Jennifer Bailey, John Thornton, and Chief Judge Bertila Soto. All of these amazing jurists were in the state court trenches with me, and I consider them to be some of the best judges in the country. The Eleventh Judicial Circuit is second to none when it comes to the Florida state judiciary. I am proud to have spent seven years as a state court judge and the amount of challenging and incredible work my colleagues do every day with limited resources is truly inspiring.

You were appointed to the state bench at 32; did your age present any obstacles? As one would expect, many in the legal community were somewhat

skeptical upon my initial appointment to the County Court bench at 32 by then-Governor Rick Scott. I am forever thankful to Senator Scott, who didn't focus on my age but only on my abilities and dedication. At that time, lawyers weren't sure that anyone at 32 years of age could command the presence and respect necessary to run a courtroom or have the life experience and wisdom necessary to make difficult decisions every single day. I knew, the minute I put on my robe for the first time, that I was going to have to prove myself. And that is what I set out to do every day I was a County Court judge—whether I was handling a landlord-tenant matter or a criminal traffic case, I worked incredibly hard to master the issues in front of me and give everyone a fair hearing.

To a certain extent, I feel the same need to prove myself when I take the bench to this very day. Because there will always be lawyers who haven't seen me in action before and don't know what kind of judge I am. For that reason, I never take my position for granted and give every case all the energy and ability I have for the litigants and their clients. I consider myself a steward and custodian of the Southern District, along with all of my incredible colleagues. Therefore, I strive to protect and enhance the reputation of our District, which has been built by the judicial legends that came before me.



I saw that you co-authored an article with your law clerk regarding the demands of mothers practicing law; explain why this topic is important to you. Working mothers, especially those in the legal profession, is a topic that is near and dear to my heart. I have witnessed first-hand the challenges that working mothers face in my own

home where my wife, Jennifer Ruiz, is a lawyer and the mother of our two young children. In addition, the first law clerk I ever hired, and the co-author of this piece, has three young girls, all ages five and under. In writing the article, my clerk and I sought to redefine what it means to be a hardworking lawyer to include indisputably qualified candidates who need some measure of flexibility to attend to young children or other parental obligations. The purpose of the article was to generate conversations about the challenges that working mothers face in the work place with the hope that we can move towards a model of work that accommodates the needs of working parents. Fortunately, the response was resoundingly positive, and I am grateful the piece has truly resonated with so many members of the legal community.

Any advice to young lawyers generally, and, in particular, to those who aspire to be judges? Get into court as much as possible to develop your oral advocacy skills. Write as much as possible to develop your motion practice, briefing ability, and find your voice. Make the most of every opportunity that comes your way. I never began my career aspiring to be a judge; I simply wanted to pursue a legal career rooted in public service and be the best lawyer I could be. But as the quality and quantity of my legal experience grew, judges I looked up to encouraged me to consider a career on the bench. In the end, if you work hard and practice with professionalism, you will be noticed. Doors will open, and new prospects will appear. And never forget that South Florida is a small legal community.

There are many opposing counsels against whom I litigated—and co-counsels that sat by my side in court—who were the first ones to support my path to the bench when I initially applied to the state court judiciary. Had I not treated these fellow lawyers with respect, humility, and civility, there is no doubt I would not be on the bench today. So never forget how to properly treat others with civility and respect.

Practice tips for a lawyer appearing before you?

Be prepared. Know your record and know your case law. I read everything that lawyers submit and cite in their moving papers, and I very often do my own research. When I set motions for oral argument, I strive to engage the lawyers before me in a discussion to better understand their respective positions. So, come to Court ready to engage and answer questions. Moreover, I set motions for hearing whenever possible in order to give lawyers—especially young lawyers—the chance to come into federal court and argue on behalf of their client. I also urge lawyers who appear before me to make every effort to write clearly and succinctly. It enhances your position and helps the Court ascertain the key issues that need to be resolved. Establishing a courtroom environment where everyone is respected and heard is very important to me. But don't forget to listen as well, and stay focused on the issues of concern to the Court. If you see that an argument is not breaking in your favor, rather than continue to hammer down on that part of your argument, move on and show me why you still think I should side with your position based on a different part of your argument.

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