

Judge Antonia Arteaga: *Family Matters*

By Toni Delgado



At first glance, Antonia “Toni” Arteaga’s chambers appear to be like those of any other Bexar County District Court Judge. Requisite dark bookshelves, framed diplomas, and court files decorate the interior. But peer into the sleek leather canisters on the side table, and you will uncover a small cache of crayons. Open the refrigerator, and next to the soft drinks and water bottles, you will find snack pack pudding, hot pockets, and a few juice boxes. Look in the bottom left drawer of her desk, and you will discover an assortment of baby wipes, toddler clothes, and toys — the typical emergency supplies that every mother of young children keeps tucked away. And you can’t tell by looking at it, but the small sofa in the corner easily converts into a chaise lounge, perfect for a napping child. It is plain to see that this modern day working mother of two is prepared for any emergency.

Raised in Ballinger, a tiny town said to lie deep in the heart of Texas, Judge Arteaga knows the importance of family. She was two years old when her mother was widowed. The youngest of eight girls, Judge Arteaga realized at an early age that in order to be heard, she needed to speak up. She can’t remember exactly when it was that she decided that she wanted to become a lawyer but distinctly recalls a school assignment where she was asked to draw her future. Judge Arteaga drew a coat of arms, complete with a picture of a courthouse and stick-figure lawyers. After graduating from high school, she left her family for the first time to attend the University of Texas at Austin. Coming from a small town whose entire population barely surpassed 4000 to attending a university where the student body alone numbered in excess of 50,000 was not easy for her. “Major culture shock” is how she describes it. But she says that it was the support of her family at home and remembering her own mother’s strong work ethic that pushed her to become the first in her family to graduate from college where, in 1994, she proudly received her B.A. in Government and Sociology.

Before she allowed herself to attend law school, Judge Arteaga worked at a publishing company for three years to pay off all of her undergraduate debt. Once that was done, she applied and was accepted to St. Mary’s School of Law, where she supported herself by working as a waitress. She met her husband David, a structural engineer, during her first year of law school, and they were married a year after she passed the bar. They are now the proud parents of Zoe, age 6, and Adam, age 3.

I first met Judge Arteaga at a Mexican American Bar Association meeting. She arrived a few minutes before the start of the meeting, with her young daughter in tow. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a notepad and some crayons and set her daughter up at a nearby table while participating actively in the meeting. When I asked her about this, Judge Arteaga smiled, shrugged and said, “Any event that I can bring my children to, I do.”

And that is certainly true. Four years ago, on the morning she was to give closing arguments in a case where she was defending a client on an assault charge, she realized that she was in labor. Unwilling to ask the court to continue a case that had already dragged on too long, she delivered her closing arguments that morning . . . and her son later that night. “It would have been an amazing story, if I had won the case,” she says

with a laugh, although I suspect that most people still find it remarkable.

After graduating from law school in 2000, she briefly worked for a technology firm. She decided to venture into private practice and racked up invaluable trial experience by taking court appointments. In fact, during this period, she tried almost seventy jury trials. In 2002, she received the President's Award from the Mexican American Bar Association, and in 2004 and 2005, the Texas Rising Star Award, voted on by peers and published by *Texas Monthly*. In 2007, Judge Arteaga was the recipient of the Rising Star Award from *Scene SA*. She has previously served as a Magistrate and Municipal Judge for the City of San Antonio. In 2008, Judge Arteaga was the first female judge to be elected to the historic 57th District Court of Bexar County, created in 1899.

Her judicial career may never have occurred if not for her husband's wishful habit of perusing the local newspaper classified ads for a Corvette. One day, David noticed and pointed out to her the listing for magistrate judge. She applied for the position and received it. One of the benefits of the position was that it was for the dreaded third shift. Well, most people dread that shift, but for a young mother whose child had just begun sleeping through the night, it offered her the ideal opportunity to serve the citizens of San Antonio by night without compromising her time with her daughter during the day. When her term was up, she was reappointed by then-Mayor Phil Hardberger.

Before considering running for district judge, she consulted her family. Her sisters-in law, Becky and Norma, immediately stepped up and offered to help out with "mommy duties." Her father-in-law, "Pop," an integral part of her support system, also encouraged her to run. Conveniently living next

door, Pop picks up Zoe from kindergarten and helps out with the myriad of events that can pop up at a moment's notice in this busy family's life.

All of this dedication to her own family does not mean that she gives anything less than 110% to her job. She is acutely aware of the consequences of her decisions as a district judge since, by her own estimate, roughly 80% of the cases she hears are family law matters. Says the Judge of this responsibility, "I take the situation at hand seri-



Judge Toni Arteaga with husband David, daughter Zoe (6), and son Adam (3)

ously and never lose sight of the lives affected, both positively and negatively, by my decisions." The best part of being a judge? "Making a positive difference in the lives of others, especially in the lives of children."

Balancing the competing pressures of family, work, and community service is something that is not easy, but she somehow makes it work. "Judge Arteaga is dedicated to her family and her duties as a jurist. She is able to balance both, by sheer determination and a level of energy that is unmatched. She can be hosting a birthday party for one of her children while on her cell phone to a judge colleague, double-checking her thinking on an issue that needs a ruling the next day," says her fellow jurist and mentor, Judge Larry Noll.

Says Judge Peter Sakai of her extraordinary energy, "Judge Arteaga hit the bench running and has not let up.

She is hard-working and energetic, as she balances her professional role as a judge, family role as a mother and spouse, and her community role of being involved with the citizens of Bexar County. She is an extraordinary role model for many people, especially for those that have to multi-task and juggle their schedules to get the job done."

"She has a lot on her plate," says her clerk Rene Charles, "but she works well under pressure," noting that she comes into the office each day happy and ready to work. "She is extremely hardworking and dedicated," he says, describing her work ethic, and tells of how, despite the fact that she is usually the last one to leave at night, he might come into the office to find an email she sent to him at 2:00 a.m. "She is always in judge-mode and will be thinking about a particular case long after she leaves the courthouse." And commenting on her dedication to the community, Rene Charles says, "If the project involves kids, she is the first one to volunteer."

In fact, Judge Arteaga recently devoted her time to the Women, Wisdom . . . Wine Poetry Slam and Luncheon with Isabel Allende, held on Saturday March 26, 2011, at the Grand Hyatt San Antonio. Judge Arteaga and her young partner, a local eighth grader, co-wrote and performed a poem called "I Am You," to rave reviews. "Judge Arteaga did a fabulous job as a poetry slammer. Not only did she graciously contribute her time and energy to creating an original piece with her high school 'slam' partner, but she also held true to her roots and showed how well she balances it all -- family, work, and giving back to her community," said Christine Reinhard, immediate past president of the Bexar County Women's Bar Association. The poetry slam was the inaugural event put on by the Women & Girls Development Foundation, which is modeled after a similar program in



Judge Toni Arteaga with the 57th District Court bailiff Steve Carpenter (left), court reporter Mary Martinez (second from right), and clerk Rene Charles (right).

Dallas. The motto of the organization is “Empower. Encourage. Exceed.” It benefits girls and adult woman by helping them reach their full potential. The event raised \$200,000 and was an encouraging start for the project’s overall goal of raising \$10 million.

Judge Arteaga’s community involvement also extends to serving on the Bexar County Juvenile Board; in the Mexican American Bar Association, in which she has been the Scholarship Committee Chair for nine years; in the NEA’s Read Across America; in the Texas Family Law Foundation; in the Community Justice Program; and at St. Dominic’s Catholic Church. She is frequently a guest speaker at area schools, participates in 5K and 10K charity runs, and more.

In keeping with the rest of her life, Judge Arteaga strives to keep her courtroom demeanor balanced — firm but professional. If you peek behind her bench, you might notice that she keeps several note cards taped to her desk to remind her of these goals while carrying out her judicial duties. One of them says, “Ensure all voices are heard. Follow the law. Listen to both sides. Rule Fairly.”

Another card says simply, “Compassion” — not that Judge Arteaga needs help in this department. This is very evident by an event that occurred

early in her career as a young lawyer. One day, while leaving the courthouse, she came upon a woman weeping on the courthouse steps. Judge Arteaga sat down and spoke to the woman and discovered that she had just lost custody of her daughter to her estranged spouse. Judge Arteaga took the case at no charge, even lending the woman a suit for court. Soon after, Judge Arteaga was able to help the woman regain custody of her daughter and the child support she was owed. The woman, Belinda Bustos, and her daughter still keep in touch with Judge Arteaga today.

Her courthouse family is also very important to her. She credits the wise words of the late Judge Andy Mireles, soon after she was elected, in helping her understand that. “Family is first, so don’t be afraid to lean on your courthouse family, too. Remember there are only twelve other people in the world that really understand what you do on a daily basis.” Judge Arteaga firmly believes that her fellow civil district judges of Bexar County, though perhaps identified by a different political party or belief, all stand behind and support each other behind the courthouse doors.

Balancing all of these challenges can be admittedly difficult, and Judge Arteaga confesses to occasional “mom-

my guilt,” but she tries to take it all in stride. For example, when a particularly difficult family law case recently forced her to spend most of her Saturday working, she spent the very next day with her kids exploring three different parks. “[I] wanted them to remember an awesome Sunday, not that Mommy was gone to work most of Saturday,” says the Judge of that very full day.

If there is any doubt about her dedication to her family, career, or community, one just needs to look at Judge Arteaga’s 2011 Fiesta Medal. Emblazoned on the front of the medal against the distinctive San Antonio skyline is Lady Justice, flanked by a young child. In one hand, she is holding up the scales of justice; in the other hand, a baby. Hands full? Yes, but I don’t think she would have it any other way.



Antoinette “Toni” Delgado is a partner in the firm of Warren, Drugan & Barrows, P.C. and practices in the areas of creditor’s rights, probate, and general civil litigation.

The next installment of the Karen Norris series on Afghanistan observations will resume in the July-August issue.