



News

National Hispanic Heritage Month: Partner Spotlight Featuring Carlos

Article

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During our celebration of National Hispanic Heritage Month this year, the Irwin Fritchie Team was honored to sit down for an interview with two of our partners – Ali Spindler and Carlos Benach – to learn about their stories and those of their families as Cuban Americans.

We also took this opportunity to gain Ali's and Carlos' perspectives on how their Hispanic heritages have impacted their lives, their thoughts on diversity within the legal profession, and how they honor the efforts and sacrifices of those who set them on their paths toward success.

We are beyond excited to share this interview with you as National Hispanic Heritage Month draws to a close in hopes that this brief look into the lives and histories of these two Cuban-American attorneys and their families will help to educate and inspire those who wish to learn from and build upon the experiences of those who came before them.

Related Professionals

Carlos A. Benach

Ali Spindler

Tell us a little bit about your career journey, including how you came to Irwin Fritchie and how you made Partner.

ALI SPINDLER: I joined Irwin Fritchie right after graduating law school in 2011, after clerking here for two summers. Right away, I started with a team working up experts for national medical device litigation, helping prepare our experts to issue reports, give depositions, and testify at trial.

After three years, I changed gears and pursued public interest work, landing as an immigration attorney for children at the Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans (CCANO). In 2017, I was ready to get back to litigation and couldn't imagine practicing anywhere but Irwin Fritchie. I rejoined the firm to work with experts, this time for our firm's growing asbestos and toxic tort practice. I was promoted to partner in January 2022.

CARLOS BENACH: I took a less traditional route to practicing law and joining the firm than most, I think. Prior to attending law school at Loyola New Orleans, I taught English at a local all-boy preparatory high school for a couple of years. I attended Loyola's evening student program, which allowed me to continue to work during the day. During law school, I joined Irwin Fritchie as a summer associate in 2013. After that summer, the firm offered me a full-time clerkship until graduation, after which I would start as an associate.

Since my time as a clerk, I was integrated into complex and interesting cases with various colleagues at the firm. I learned about case strategy and development, trial preparation and practice, and the appellate process. Once I became an associate, my partners gave me opportunities to take depositions, draft and argue motions, present case evaluations to clients, prepare expert witnesses and participate in trial. After seven years, I was promoted to partner in the Winter of 2022, and I continue to work with the same great team of lawyers on a variety of cases.

Have you noticed or experienced any recent significant/impactful advancements for Hispanic Americans, either within the legal industry or as a whole?

CARLOS BENACH: Born and raised in Miami, I saw Hispanic men and women succeed and thrive in all areas of business. I did not have any lawyers in my family, but I was familiar with successful

Hispanic attorneys. Although the Hispanic community is not as large as Miami, I continuously meet Hispanic attorneys in New Orleans and Louisiana rising through the ranks of firms, businesses, and government. Considering that the Hispanic population in the US is one of, if not the, fastest growing minority groups in the US, I believe that with time and intention more Hispanic Americans will join and rise in the legal community.

ALI SPINDLER: I absolutely agree. The number of Hispanic attorneys in the legal profession is slowly but surely growing, but there is still much room for improvement, particularly among Hispanic women. A recent Law360 article reported that Hispanic women make up only 4% of associates, 1.7% of nonequity partners, and less than 1% of equity partners in law firms. Progress is being made, but we certainly need to improve those numbers.

CARLOS BENACH: Honestly, it's a simple recipe: access, mentorship, and opportunity. Irwin Fritchie saw something in me and gave me the opportunity to observe, learn, make mistakes, and develop my skills and practice. The same recipe should be applied industry-wide to other minority candidates (not just Hispanic ones) that are from non-traditional legal or business backgrounds. Nurturing and unlocking the potential of diverse candidates instills confidence in their ability to compete and perform at a high level. It also inspires others to do the same.

Who stood as your inspirational figures or trailblazers as you navigated the path to your current levels of success in the legal field and life, in general? What was it about their lives and accomplishments that generated such a lasting impact?

ALI SPINDLER: For me, I have always looked to my mother, Aymee Costales Spindler. She was born in Havana and had experienced a fairly peaceful childhood until Fidel Castro's communist regime turned it into a life of chaos almost overnight.

My grandfather, Edmundo Costales, was a military officer who quit after Castro came into power. He was imprisoned for helping with efforts to overthrow Castro. As a result, my grandmother, Sonia Costales, had to raise my mom essentially alone throughout intense political turmoil. They were all finally able to escape Cuba in the late 1960s, and they came to New Orleans with essentially nothing to start their lives over again. The Catholic church helped them find housing and basic supplies, and my grandparents began working at a grocery store to make ends meet in their early days here.

Mom somehow taught herself English at night, made it through school, then went on to graduate from dental school and become the first female periodontist in the New Orleans area. Throughout it all, she worked hard, never gave up on her goals and, against so many odds, achieved them.

Whenever I feel challenged, I remember my mom's perseverance—over discrimination, sexism, language barriers, and the loss of her home and country—and know that I can handle whatever comes my way.

CARLOS BENACH: Like Ali, I've always drawn inspiration from my family. Particularly, my paternal grandfather, Bienvenido Benach, and maternal grandmother, Celia Veiga. Both are immigrants from Cuba, and both have been instrumental in my successes in life and the development of who I am as a person.

Bienvenido Benach was a successful and highly regarded OB-GYN (obstetrician-gynecologist) in Havana. Like many Cubans in the 1960s, he fled the communist regime of Fidel Castro, but doing so required him to leave his homeland, his history, and – crazily enough – his medical degree. In fact, after fleeing to the United States, he took a teaching position at the University of West Virginia, where he taught while preparing to take the medical board examination so he could once again practice medicine.

After finally taking and passing the examination, my grandfather learned that he had received less than a perfect score. Trusting his capabilities and accepting no less than what he was due after such a long journey back to a career he loved, he challenged the examiners' score, defended his exam answers, and his exam was ultimately adjusted to correctly acknowledge a perfect score. He then returned to Miami and opened a busy and successful OB-GYN practice where he treated and delivered three generations of patients from all walks of life. He was known in the community for his generosity and proudly treated patients regardless of status or wealth.

My maternal grandmother, Celia Veiga, is from the other side of the spectrum. Raised on a military base in Havana, she left her family and a successful grocery store business to start anew in Miami, Florida. While raising two young girls in exile, she and my grandfather worked in factories and odd jobs throughout the city, saving their money to open a grocery store.

With a grade school education, she learned a new language and ran the store for years with her husband before it was eventually sold. She continued to work as an accountant into her eighties while being a fundamental part of my life and development.

Do you make any efforts in your daily life and career to honor their legacies? If so, what do those efforts look like?

CARLOS BENACH: I try to honor their sacrifices and legacies throughout my life. Whether striving for excellence in my legal career, teaching and raising my children, or just displaying kindness and respect for others.

ALI SPINDLER: I try to honor my family's experience by maintaining perspective and gratitude. Day-to-day things can seem challenging, but I am so fortunate to have my family, my career, and my home.

Professionally, I also strive to take pro bono immigration cases whenever I can. It's so important for us as legal professionals to serve others, and it's important for me to help people in circumstances similar to what my family faced escaping Cuba. It's a small way I can honor my family and serve the community through my work.

My years working for Immigration Legal Services (ILS) at Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans (CCANO), alongside several other Hispanic and Spanish-speaking attorneys, were some of the most inspiring – and honestly, fun – years of my legal practice.

I am half Cuban but was born and raised in Louisiana, and for most of my life, I hadn't really felt like part of any Hispanic community outside my family. That changed when I joined CCANO to represent children in immigration proceedings. It was an incredible experience to work with other young, Spanish-speaking, mostly female attorneys who were dedicated to genuinely connecting with their clients and securing the best results for them. I'm still inspired by that CCANO community, who helped me reconnect with my heritage and become a better lawyer.

The work we did at CCANO was very impactful, as well. The majority of our clients were from Central America and faced dire circumstances if they had to return to their home countries. I knew the hardships that my own family faced when they immigrated to the United States, and I was very aware of the opportunities I'd had growing up as a US citizen that they didn't have. It was very meaningful to "pay it forward" a generation after my family came to the US by helping kids and families with their own immigration cases.

What advice would you have to give to young, Hispanic law students and aspiring lawyers who may be just beginning or facing difficulties in their career journey?

CARLOS BENACH: Embrace your history, your name, and your light. Professional and personal challenges are an invitation for growth. Ask questions, seek mentorship, and forge relationships with professionals you respect and admire. If you are persistent, you will find the people who want to help you and see you flourish. Finally, remember that it takes a village. I am a product of a community of people (from Miami and New Orleans) who believed in me, worked with me, and gave me a shot. I owe a lot of people a debt of time, patience, wisdom, and guidance.

What advice would you give to high-level executives in law firms who are working toward becoming a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization?

CARLOS BENACH: If you haven't already realized that there is strength in diversity of perspective, then you're already behind the eight ball. At the heart of any business is connecting with people. For legal executives, lawyers must connect with co-workers, staff, clients, witnesses, experts, the jury, and the judge. Considering that all of these people will come from different backgrounds, races, ethnicities, religions, experiences, and homes, you should build your teams in light of this reality. Your ability to present a strong case is only enhanced by the spectrum of experience and perspective on your team.

ALI SPINDLER: 100%. Having diversity of backgrounds and perspectives can only improve your firm and, ultimately, results for your clients. When you build a team of people who are all the same, they will probably approach and present cases in the same way. When you take care to build a team of people with different perspectives, they will have different approaches to solving problems, as well as different insights for connecting with a client, witness, or jury. We're at our best when we have that richness of perspectives.