

'Speechless' Cristina Pérez upsets Judge Judy, wins Emmy

By Lee Hernández

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In what was arguably the most shocking moment of the 35th annual Daytime Entertainment Emmy Awards on June 20, rookie judge Cristina Pérez of “Cristina’s Court” beat television veteran “Judge Judy” for Best Legal/Courtroom Program.

Pérez, a New Yorker of Colombian heritage, was the only one of the 14 winners who gave an acceptance speech in both English and Spanish.

“This award goes to my parents, mami y papi. Esto es para ustedes!” she said onstage at Hollywood’s Kodak Theatre.

The former host of a court show on Telemundo, Pérez is the first judge to cross over from Spanish-language to English-language television.

“Winning didn’t even cross our minds,” she says.

Fellow nominee Judith Sheindlin (aka “Judge Judy”) was the odds-on favorite to win the new category — which many thought was created in part to honor the industry icon.

“I didn’t prepare a speech,” Pérez says. “We all thought Judy would win. She is the woman who started it all, so why would I ever prepare anything?”

When Pérez’s name was called, she didn’t even move, so her husband had to nudge her to get up and accept her award.

On her way to the stage, she took a moment to embrace Sheindlin. “She was so gracious,” says Pérez, who says “Judge Judy” gave her a kiss on each cheek.

Pérez even forgot to thank her husband, her 5-year-old daughter and the show’s executive producer, Peter Brennan — who served as the original producer of “Judge Judy.”

“We are just a small budgeted show with not the greatest time slot,” says Pérez of the daytime syndicated show, now in its second season (weekdays 1:30 p.m., WNYW/Channel 5).

Pérez also beat nominees “Judge David Young,” the “Judge Hatchett Show” and fellow Latina Marilyn Milian of “The People’s Court.”

Pérez believes her Emmy is a tribute to her immigrant parents, who came to the United States from Colombia in 1963.

“My parents worked very hard for their kids and they were very happy to see me win the award,” she says.

Born in New York City, Pérez made her television debut in Spanish as the judge of “La Corte Del Pueblo,” and later joined “La Corte de la Familia,” also at Telemundo.

For the last 20 years she has lived in Glendale, Calif., but “Cristina’s Court” tapes in Houston, which means she flies out Monday evenings and tapes nonstop Wednesday to Friday.

“Thank God I have an incredible husband who is a total Nuyorican man, but who also doesn’t mind being Mr. Mom while I’m away,” she says.

During the Emmy awards show Pérez was surrounded by designer dresses, but chose to wear a simple outfit she got from a close friend in California.

“Even though my shoes cost more than my dress did, and I borrowed my mom’s jewelry,” she said. “I felt like a princess.”