



## The Healing Judge: Cristina Perez

[By Mary Waldron]

Cristina Perez began her career as a lawyer, but throughout the past decade, she has bloomed into a reality court TV judge and television personality, a radio show host, and an inspirational author. Her aggressive go-getter attitude and wisdom, combined with her strong moral foundation, have lifted her to many platforms from which she has begun to share her inspirational advice and lessons with women and Latinos everywhere.

Once Perez completed her undergraduate studies in international history and Spanish literature at the University of California, Los Angeles, she decided to follow her passion and attend law school. She had thought about going to medical school like her father, who is a surgeon, but knew that she needed to become a lawyer. "My mom knew before I knew that I was going to be a lawyer-it was just the kind of person that I was," she said.

Perez's heritage and background and the morals that her parents raised her with have been huge influences on not only her personal life but also her professional life. Her father has been one of her most influential professional mentors.

"He always told me, 'You choose a profession that you have passion for-that you wake up every morning and you say, "I can't wait to go to work." If you love it and treat it with dignity every day, it'll be something that will never be boring to you, and it will be rewarding,'" she said. "I saw how hard he struggled to become a surgeon. Through the good and the bad, it was so rewarding for him. All the bad has been weighed out by the good."

When Perez's parents emigrated from Colombia to the United States hoping to find a better life, they became immersed in years of triumph as they raised their family in New York City. Although her father was an able-bodied, hard worker, he constantly battled discrimination because of his strong accent. The only job he could get was a janitor position, which he held for five years while he saved for medical school.

Perez's father worked 30 minutes from their apartment, so he was only able to see his family

on the weekends because it cost too much money to travel back and forth each day. Soon after leaving his job as a janitor, he began working at a blood bank as a technician and then became chief of the blood bank. By this time, Perez's father had saved enough to attend medical school in Mexico. He later graduated as the medical school's valedictorian.



In spite of his tremendous success and the fact that he overcame many trials throughout his career, Perez's father always dealt with discrimination because of his background and accent. This adversity fueled Perez's passion for succeeding in law.

"They [her parents] are the typical immigrant success story, and just watching all their

sacrifices and obstacles they had to go through-it never sat right with me," she said. Perez was inspired to go into law to stand up for those who needed a voice, much like her parents did in their early years in the U.S.

Although Perez opted to attend a smaller, more private law school-Whittier Law School in Costa Mesa, CA-it turned out to be the perfect fit for her. "It was small, and the teachers were of an incredible caliber, from top, Ivy League schools. It was really a very rewarding experience," she said. While there, she kept busy as the president of the Hispanic American Law Students Association and the law school. Perez was also a member of the Student Body Association.

In law school, Perez tried to surround herself with many students and mentors of excellence. "Lawyers are a dime a dozen. You really have to be good at what you do. I always tried to surround myself with people who were good at what they did and who were honest and never forgot where they came from," she explained.

Toward the end of law school, Perez attended an immigration law seminar that was put on by the Student Bar Association. It was there that she discovered her calling in the law. Immigration law combined Perez's passion for standing up for others with her connections to immigrant roots. After being inspired by this seminar, Perez began clerking at an immigration law firm and continued working there as an attorney after she graduated from law school. Next, Perez moved on to work for the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office in Alhambra, CA.

Perez was able to establish a very trusted and strong clientele base that included many

**Q. What do you do for fun?**

A. Spending time with my family. I also love sci-fi movies and golfing with my husband.

**Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?**

A. Andrea Bocelli's *Amore*.

**Q. What is the last magazine you read?**

A. *Shape* and *Newsweek*.

**Q. What is your favorite TV show?**

A. I love the *CSI* shows, *The Unit*, and *Ugly Betty*.

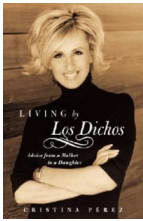
**Q. Who is your role model?**

A. My parents.



professionals, entertainers, and athletes, most of whom were Latinos. “My business is like a little bit of home. I treat everyone like my mom would treat you if you went over to her house,” Perez said.

One day, one of Perez’s producer clients approached her and said, “Cristina, you would be great for television.”



Although Perez had made plenty of television appearances commenting on immigration law issues, her response was “You have got to be kidding me!”

Days later, after a screen test with the network, Perez was booked on the Spanish reality court TV show *La Corte de Familia* (*Family Court*). “It wasn’t like I wanted to, and it wasn’t like I thought about it—it just kind of happened. When doors open like that and it feels right, you just do it,” she said.

Perez’s show, which reenacted the courtroom family drama in related cases, quickly became popular with Telemundo Network viewers. Besides the fact that she was the first female judge-actor to appear in a national Spanish network series, her show became one of the highest ranking Spanish-language programs in the country. Perez also had a local court show called *La Corte del Pueblo*.

Six years later, Perez was given another breakthrough opportunity: she would make the transition to an English-language courtroom television show. Currently, she is working on her first season of the crossover show, *Cristina’s Court*, which airs on FOX.

Throughout her court TV career, Perez has developed a distinctive style of ruling the

courtroom. Her strong morals, beliefs, and family values play large roles in her show.

“I’m very natural. Everything always comes from my heart. Nothing is rehearsed,” she said. “Law is my passion, and I love people. I know how valuable family and relationships are and how valuable it is to be yourself.”

Perez’s executive producer even calls her the “healing judge” because many of her once-angry guests leave the courtroom happy and with feelings of resolution, even if they do not win their cases. Perez wants her guests and viewers to understand the reasoning behind the cases, bringing a sense of awareness and lessons learned to each show. “I think mixing a little bit of human nature and our life stories with the law teaches much more valuable lessons,” she said.

After all is said and done, Perez is certainly glad she took the offer to audition for *La Corte de Familia*, as it has launched even more opportunities in addition to her television shows. “Maintaining my identity and my culture opened so many doors for me,” she said.

One of these doors was an offer to write a book. While she was filming *La Corte de Familia*, she was approached by a first-generation-Latina editor who thought that Perez’s stories and sayings that she shared on the show should be put into a book. *Living by Los Dichos: Advice from a Mother to a Daughter* came out in September 2006, and it discusses some of the most prominent *dichos* (Spanish sayings or proverbs) that many Latina women have carried with them for centuries.

The book is a collage of advice, stories, and self-help; it is divided into three sections: defining *los dichos*, lessons for relationships and marriage, and lessons for family and parenthood. Perez gathered all of the lessons and stories her mother taught her and compiled them for her own daughter, and others, to learn from and enjoy.

Throughout her book, Perez refers to herself as a “confused feminist,” meaning that she has gone after all her goals and has never limited herself, yet she has never forgotten that she is a woman and embraces her femininity. Her message to other women is “Never, ever forget you are a woman. I’m very traditional. I’m very proud of where I came from. I’m not afraid to serve my husband dinner. No one will ever disrespect you because you are a true lady and you’re smart.”

In addition to speaking at various prestigious lectures and seminars, Perez is also a co-host of a Spanish radio show for Radio Univision that discusses issues like government, education, and politics. The Los Angeles-based radio show airs on 1020 AM every Monday night, but because of her hectic schedule, Perez is currently on the show only once per month.

Perez is also a managing partner at her firm, Perez Gonzalez, which she and her husband, Christopher, run. They specialize in immigration law as well as business, corporate, and media-related cases. She currently resides in Los Angeles with her husband and their daughter, Sofia Daniella.

“I remember growing up and people saying, ‘My gosh, you’re a woman, you’re Latina, you speak Spanish—that might be a problem,’” she said. “But the facts that I am a woman, I am Latina, and that I speak Spanish have been the keys to my success. Once I realized that and proudly embraced that and where I came from, I never looked back.”

#### ON THE NET

Whittier Law School  
[www.law.whittier.edu](http://www.law.whittier.edu)

Perez Gonzalez  
[www.california-lawfirm.com](http://www.california-lawfirm.com)

*Living by Los Dichos: Advice from a Mother to a Daughter*  
[www.amazon.com/Living-Los-Dichos-Advice-Daughter/dp/0743287789](http://www.amazon.com/Living-Los-Dichos-Advice-Daughter/dp/0743287789)