
Ana Reyes Named 2017 WBA Woman Lawyer of the Year

The Women's Bar Association of the District of Columbia (WBA) honored Ana Reyes, Partner and Co-chair of Williams & Connolly's International Litigation Practice Group, as the 2017 WBA Woman Lawyer of the Year at the organization's Annual Dinner on May 17, 2017, in Washington, DC. The Woman Lawyer of the Year Award recognizes a leader who has championed change in the profession by leading by example, advocating for justice, and promoting the advancement of women in the profession.

In its Centennial year, the WBA is "Looking Back, and Moving Forward, and Ms. Reyes' personal and professional trajectory embodies that theme." Born in Uruguay, at the age of five, she emigrated from Spain to the United States. Her family's experience influences her work helping persecuted persons, especially women, find refuge in the United States. Karen Musalo, the Director of Center for Gender & Refugee Studies notes, "Ana represents the very best of the legal profession: an accomplished and skilled litigator who provides the same high quality zealous advocacy whether she is representing an international corporation, a foreign government, or a refugee child."

Below, is Ana's speech given at the WBA Awards Dinner on May 17, 2017.

Good evening, and thank you Sonia.

At my law school graduation my mother pulled me aside to give me some unsolicited advice, which I thought I would share with you today. If the advice sounds a little dramatic, let me assure you that my mother is a little dramatic; but serious as a heart attack.

She said, "You are here today because you have had advantages that most people will never have. There are people who are smarter than you, who work harder than you, and who want it more than you, but who are not here because they have not had your advantages. So while I am proud of you today, know that if you do not use your law degree in some way to help disadvantaged people, I am going to be incredibly disappointed in you."

If you are wondering at this moment whether my mother kept track of what I did with my law degree, I would just point out that she flew from Louisville, Kentucky to be here tonight and is currently sitting next to the Chair of Williams & Connolly's Executive Committee.

I mention this because I would like to start by thanking the Women's Bar Association for what all of you see as an award, but for what I see as proof to my mother that I do in fact listen to her.

If I am being honest, at first I ignored her advice. I was too busy being busy to think about much more than my own career. Then the firm accepted a pro bono asylum case involving female genital mutilation, which I helped handle. The case involved a mother, who had been subjected to FGM. She and her husband were adamant that it not happen to their daughters as well. But the father traveled for work. One day while he was gone, villagers came to their house, tied down and gagged the mother. They took the oldest daughter, held her outstretched by her hands and feet, and cut off her clitoris. No anesthesia, no anesthetic. After they were down they used a common sewing needle and twine to sew her up. Then they sat her outside of the house, with an eggplant next to her. The eggplant signifying that she was now eligible for marriage. When the father returned, the mother insisted that the family flee their village—leave everything and everyone they had ever known—to protect the two younger daughters. They obtained asylum in the United States.

In the years since that case, the firm has taken dozens of asylum cases. And I have been privileged to represent many extraordinary women seeking refuge here. Extraordinary women who have not only survived their own particular form of torture, but who have found the wherewithal to make their way, often with their families, to safety and refuge in the United States. And who, while here, take that same tenacity to improve their lives and the lives of others.

My friend Dee Martin and I worked with one young woman who had escaped brutal torture and was in hiding for months while we worked to get her into the United States. When we finally got her here we met her at the airport and, after hours trying to get through customs, we finally met and took her to a late lunch. We asked, what do you want to do first now that you are finally here, in the United States? She said, and I will never forget this. She said, “I would like some French fries.” And then, more seriously, she said, “I want to go to school. I just want to go to school.” She was so far behind in her education that she needed an elementary school tutor though she was a teenager. Two years later she had a greater than 4.0 GPA in one of the most difficult high schools in her district.

Another asylum client ultimately joined ROTC. When we asked her why ROTC she said, and I’m not making this up or exaggerating it for story-telling effect, she said, “I joined ROTC because I want to help protect the country that protected me.”

So, mom, I took your advice. And as I am sure you suspected, I learned some important lessons along the way. And I thought that since I dragged you out here, I would share some of those lessons with you tonight.

The first lesson is, to paraphrase President Obama, that women and girls are bad asses. If you have any question about that, just take a look around this room, or come talk to me about the extraordinary women we’ve represented.

The second lesson is that advantages in life come in a lot of different forms, not all of them involving wealth or connections. My family came to the United States when I was in kindergarten. I didn't know a word of English at the time. Something I remember because my friends told me that the English word for agua (water) was coke. As you can imagine, I got a lot of stern responses when I asked for coke, thinking I was asking for water. My family also wasn't rich. We lived paycheck to paycheck at best, and there were a lot of difficult years. So in law school I will admit that I was envious of my more privileged colleagues. I thought I was there in spite of my disadvantages not because of any advantages.

My clients have taught me what a self-centered and narrow worldview that was. I had a roof over my head and food on the table and a supportive family. I could go to school without fear of getting dragged out at gunpoint simply because I was a girl. I didn't have to spend months in hiding after being tortured, praying that some lawyer in the US I had never met would conjure up a magic visa. The point being, if I may, that very likely each of us is here because we have had advantages that many people will never get. We each could have been on the receiving end of my mother's graduation day advice.

Which leads me to my third lesson, and that is that a law degree is more than a piece of paper or a vehicle to a career. A law degree is a powerful tool that fundamentally can affect change in people's lives. About ten years ago we had an asylum client who had been an outspoken political activist. The ruling party had him arrested on no charges, thrown in prison and left there for months. Every couple of weeks the guards would take him out, hang him upside down, and pour hot tar over his bare feet. They called it "hot coffeing."

This March he came by the firm and dropped off wedding invitations for each of his lawyers. He said, "You must come to my wedding. I wouldn't have the life I have today if it weren't for my lawyers. You must come to my wedding."

That is the power of a law degree. That is the power of a law degree multiplied by every person in this room if we each take just some small amount of time to use our law degrees to help those who have been less advantaged than we have been.

And, the final lesson is that I have a lot to be thankful for. I am thankful in particular to my clients, who have helped me not only become a better lawyer, but also a more fulfilled individual. In particular, I'd like to thank the work of committed lawyers at the Center for Gender & Refugee Studies and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. It is an honor to represent you in fighting for the rights of refugees in the United States.

I am also thankful to my friends at Williams & Connolly. By way of background, I am a gay, Hispanic female. I was born in South America and grew up in Kentucky. I went to a small college in Kentucky because they gave me a full scholarship and my family couldn't afford anything else. I deferred law school for a year to work for a group called

the Feminist Majority Foundation, and currently sit on its Board. To this day, my favorite inside the Beltway thing to do is to sit on my couch, in my sweatpants, with a glass of red wine watching reruns of the Gilmore Girls.

I am what some people would call diverse. And from the moment I walked through the doors of Williams & Connolly, I have been welcomed. And encouraged, and supported, and challenged, and most importantly mentored by individuals who by any objective measure are some of the finest attorneys in America, and certainly some of the finest people.

It is a core tenet of the law firm that no attorney wins a case alone, and that is doubly true for this award. Countless attorneys and staff have dedicated themselves to the cases that are being recognized here tonight. And the firm partnership has made repeatedly and unequivocally clear that our pro bono efforts are a key component of what marks our excellence as a firm, and that you cannot have one without the other.

For the past many years I have done everything in my power to test the limits of that commitment. And every time I personally think I may have gone too far, I inevitably get a phone call from someone on our executive committee. And the call always goes something like this, "Thank you for your efforts on behalf of refugees, and make sure to let us know if there is anything else you need to help support your efforts."

I am incredibly honored to accept this award tonight on behalf of Williams & Connolly, which is its true recipient.

I will, however, keep it in my office.

To the Women's Bar Association, thank you for all of your efforts on behalf of women. For a 100 years you have helped ensure that we too have the ability to obtain and use law degrees for the benefit of others. I think I can safely speak for all of us when I say that we are looking forward to the next 100 years.

And finally, I have to admit that my client's wedding is not the one I am most looking forward to this summer. That one would be my own. My fiancé is here tonight, and I'd just like to say, Whitney, I love you more than I can say, and I can't wait to start our lives together. I know nothing I've been able to accomplish alone will compare to what we will do together.

Thank you. Thank you for listening.

Thank you to the Women's Bar Association.

And mom, please keep the advice coming.