

The Privilege of Choice

By Luz E. Herrera '95 (Political Science and Sociology)

In May 2002, I opened up a small law office in Compton, California. When people find out that I am a graduate of Stanford University and Harvard Law School, they ask why Compton? Could I not find any other job? After all, Ivy League graduates are not competing for jobs in a city with a reputation that has been destroyed by years of gang and drug violence.

Although my view of Compton differs from its reputation, not a week goes by that I do not also ask myself why I have taken on this challenge. Starting a new business is difficult. Learning the ropes of litigation is trying. Working with low-income and unsophisticated clients can be draining. Doing all three simultaneously is downright overwhelming. As a young solo practitioner with limited resources and experience, I often miss the security of a stable income and peer support. So, why did I choose this path? Quite simply - it allows me to be me.

When I arrived at Stanford I had big dreams and plenty of courage. Through the support of wonderful mentors and student support centers like the Haas Center, I took full advantage of the opportunities available. I traveled abroad, I participated in the Stanford in Washington program, I was involved in student government, I was a resident assistant, I was active in several student organizations and I took advantage of research grants that increased the relevance of my education. The post-



Luz Herrera, an educational delegate to Cuba for the William C. Velasquez Institute (www.wcvi.org) with a tobacco farmer, February 2002.

graduate John Gardner Fellowship helped cement the ideals that were most important to me.

Although I learned a great deal from my experiences in law school and in the world of corporate law, I was not fulfilled professionally and personally. I used to think that once I completed

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—Elise Miller

my education, all of the pieces in my life would synchronize into a beautiful melody. Ironically, after working so hard to do well in school, the only thing I had accomplished was a dependency on a toxic job environment that helped pay bills (which reflected a less frugal lifestyle). Those experiences distanced me from the reasons I went to law school – to help low-income individuals, like my parents, reach their potential.

As alumni from institutions like

Stanford, we have golden passports that can pry open sealed doors. We have the opportunity and responsibility to create work environments that allow us to grow, to learn and to be happy. Few others in our society and in our families have that flexibility. Although it has been financially and emotionally difficult to represent the working poor, I remind myself that I am doing what I want to do and in a way I want to do it. Starting my own law practice has taught

me the greatest lessons in humility and personal responsibility. After all is said and done, I am the only person I can point a finger at when something goes wrong.

Now I understand that there is no magic signal that notifies us we are ready to make our dreams come true. After we travel the road that others help us define – we have only ourselves to look to for guidance. I do not know how long I will sustain my office. Perhaps, I will get tired of not earning enough money or the stress of helping low-income individuals will weigh too heavily on my personal life. Only time will tell. I now accept that my visions and passions will take many forms and directions. The luxury of my education is the privilege of choice. As you embark on a new year, I encourage you all to renew your spirit of service by drawing strength from your choices and exercising your privilege.