

Work at innocence clinic helped shape attorney's love for the law

By Brian Cox

Attorney Alejandra Barcenas knew a career in public interest was probably not a realistic fit for her when as the student director of the Life After Innocence legal clinic in Chicago she gave away her mattress, lamps, and television to an exonerated man recently released from prison.

"Every time I met a new exoneree, I wanted to give literally everything I had to them," says Barcenas, who goes by Ale. "Every time, which became a bit of a problem in itself."

After receiving some sage advice from attorneys at the Illinois Innocence Project, she realized her future fiancé had a point when he said, "You can't do this for everyone and you're going to want to do this for everyone."

The clinic helped exonerees navigate through the legal and social challenges they face after release. Law students consult with exonerees and pursue legislation, litigation, and fund-raising.

"It was such an amazing experience. It was so rewarding. In many ways it was some of the best work I've done," says Barcenas. "I promised myself it's something I eventually want to get involved



Attorney Ale Barcenas and her fiancé, Seth, love spending time with their two dogs on walks in Chicago.



with again in some capacity, but I realized it could not be what I do full time because I don't have the skills necessary to shoulder the heavy emotional toll that comes with each case without letting it take over my life. I think this is something people take for granted about this kind of work but it's so important and something I truly admire so much about the attorneys that do this work full time."

The Loyola School of Law alum is now a litigation associate at the Chicago law firm of Lipe Lyons Murphy Nahrstadt & Pontikis, Ltd. where she represents clients in state and federal court cases involving a variety of claims, including commercial disputes, catastrophic loss, construction injuries, and breach of contract, just to name a few.

Born in Mexico City, Barcenas spent her early years growing up in Toluca, the capital city of the State of Mexico. Her mother, Margarita, was a dentist who operated several clinics and her father, Miguel, was a marketing director. When Barcenas was 10, her father's position with PepsiCo as senior marketing director for Latin America prompted a life-changing move to Westchester, NY. To Barcenas, the Hudson Valley town seemed almost idyllic and a mirror of what she imagined the United States to be like.

"I distinctly remember being very excited about the prospect of seeing real live yellow school buses and school cafeterias," she says. "It felt like what I considered to be the American Dream based on the movies I'd seen."

Though it was difficult at times not knowing English, she remembers being more excited than scared and quickly adapted, learning the language and making friends. Possibly the most challenging part was being placed in a different classroom from her fraternal twin, Deborah, at school.

A few years later, her father's job once again relocated the family, this time to Pompano Beach, FL, which Barcenas says with a laugh was more of a culture shock than when they arrived in New York from Mexico.

"I had never been anywhere like Florida," she says.

Determined to make her own money at just fourteen years old, Barcenas says it was in Florida that she got her first job – as a "Statue of Liberty" waving to passersby outside Liberty Income Tax. She even convinced the owner to hire a few of her friends so that there were two Statues of Liberty and an Uncle Sam.

Later in high school, she thought she might become a doctor, but in college at Boston University when she didn't do very well in a biology course, she reconsidered her career choice and began focusing on political and philosophy classes. An internship with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination opened her

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eyes to the field of law. She found the work inspiring.

"Helping people realize that these legal tools exist that they didn't know they had and helping them use them felt very powerful and important," she says.

While there were plenty of doctors in her family, Barcenas only knew of one lawyer – her aunt America Barcenas, who is a successful corporate fiscal attorney in Mexico. Barcenas' career mind was made up.

After graduating from Boston University in 2014 with a degree in Political Science and Philosophy, Barcenas chose Loyola University of Chicago School of Law despite knowing no one in Chicago. She says she was determined to live alone so that she could focus on her studies. Within two weeks, she had adopted a dog. She now has two.

"I'm obsessed with my dogs," she says. "My friends and family know the best way to guarantee I show up to something is to tell me I can take my dogs."

She is also into scuba diving. She and her fiancé, Seth, have dived with great white sharks near Guadalupe Island off the coast of Mexico's Baja California Peninsula, in the Sea of Cortez, around Galapagos Island, in Australia, and in the Grand Cayman Islands.

"We try to go once a year," she says. "I particularly like the live-aboards, where you spend the week on a boat and do five or six dives a day."

While in law school, she did a brief stint with a law firm that specialized in ERISA (Employee Retirement Insurance Security Act), but she found it too niche. She was looking for more litigation experience, and she found it with a small plaintiffs' litigation firm where she clerked for nearly three years, gaining extensive knowledge in insurance subrogation litigation and insurance coverage and defense.

"I learned a lot really quickly," she says. "I was lucky to have attorneys there who were willing to take the time to teach me. Especially when it comes to insurance, which is a difficult topic to teach and learn. The attorneys there were so knowledgeable and passionate about their work. They talked about insurance and policies like they were Sudoku puzzles and so much fun. It was contagious."

She credits the experience for fostering in her an appreciation



Ale Barcenas has scuba dived off the coast of Mexico's Baja California Peninsula, in the Sea of Cortez, around Galapagos Island, in Australia, and in the Grand Cayman Islands.



Ale Barcenas' first job was at the age of 14, dressing as a "Statue of Liberty" and waving at passersby for Liberty Income Tax. Her friends Anna and Melissa liked to visit.

for insurance law, which she admits is "not super sexy," but she sees insurance policies like a logic puzzle and finds it challenging.

Barcenas joined Lipe Lyons Murphy Nahrstadt & Pontikis, Ltd. as an associate after graduating in 2018. She appreciated that the firm had young partners who were becoming owners.

"It's always refreshing to see younger people in leadership positions," she says. "And I was even more drawn in by their message that there are more seats at the table. At that point, my experience had been that leadership at most law firms was an impenetrable mysterious out of reach bubble for associates. This was the first time I heard a law firm openly say they are looking for the next generation of talent to add to their leadership. It was clear to me that opportunities exist here that don't exist at other firms."

She says the founding partners are committed to establishing a firm that will continue their legacy, not go down in flames with their departure. With that in mind, all the firm's partners are inclined to distribute work and to encourage younger associates to become involved with clients with the goal of growing business for everyone. The partners actively look for ways to incorporate their associates into the firm's business development and open the doors for associates to interact with clients. They see the benefit in having associates build relationships with the clients rather than feeling it's a detriment to their own book of business.

"They don't believe hoarding work and clients benefits anyone," says Barcenas. "They understand this is how you develop and grow the firm, and keep associates engaged – by giving people opportunities."

She also feels the associates are heard and involved in developing and shaping the firm's culture and its policies.

"They listen and respond and have implemented changes that

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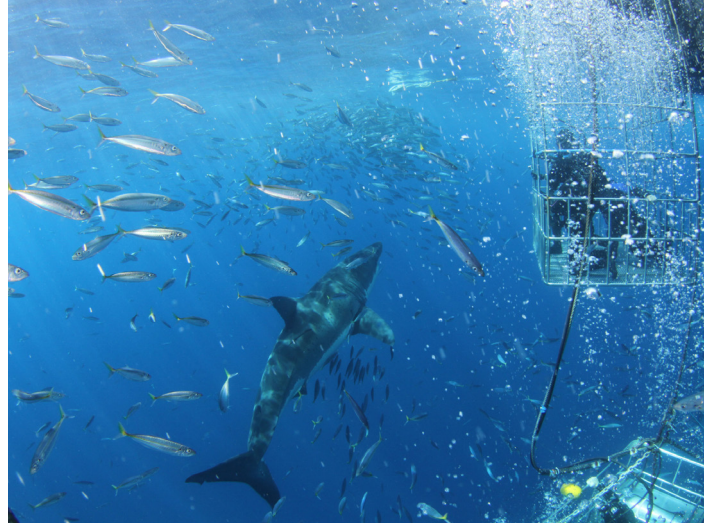
are important to associates," she says. "While many other firms have taken back their work-from-home promises, Lipe Lyons stood by theirs. They changed the maternity policy, created a paternity policy. They champion women and diversity. And they really mean it. They do it. It's not a forced fake sentiment. It happens very naturally."

Barcnas first became involved with Primerus™ at the suggestion of the firm's managing partner, James Whalen. She was looking for opportunities to network and develop business. She attended her first Global Conference last year and is now engaging regularly with the International Practice Committee.

"One of the things that I value the most is that I've met very successful attorneys from other firms that have become really great mentors for me," she says. "And, as a young associate, it's nice to have that resource of people who are successful and more experienced than you that you can talk to without feeling like your talking to your boss."

The Primerus™ International Practice Committee affords Barcnas access to attorneys with whom she can collaborate and create a network that can make her a more attractive attorney to clients. Barcnas, whose aunt has now referred some business her way, is coming to appreciate that her bilingualism may be more than just a tool for occasional translation needs. She sees now how it can be a valuable asset in the development of her business, although she's still not certain exactly what shape her practice will take.

"It is exciting because I'm at a point where it could go in many directions. And I'm lucky to work at a firm where I know I will have not just the support but the encouragement I need to make it happen," she says.



Ale Barcnas has dived with great white sharks near Guadalupe Island.

