

Colombian attorney makes her 'place' in the criminal law field



By Brian Cox

Law is woven into the fabric of attorney Laura Pinilla De Brigard's family heritage.

Her grandfather, Eliecer, was a criminal attorney and her father, Felipe, is a founding partner of Pinilla, González & Prieto Abogados in Bogotá, Colombia, where his daughter is a criminal attorney like her grandfather.

"I loved criminal law from the very beginning," she says. "I think it's the practice area where you have the most contact with human beings. The fight is over the freedom of a person, not over money."

An equally important thread of Pinilla's heritage is her interest in understanding human behavior and her passion for social service. Her mother, Natalia, is a psychologist who established the first kindergarten in Colombia based on logotherapy, a concept developed by the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. It is based on the premise that the primary motivational force for individuals is to find meaning in life.

"Psychology was an important issue in our house because we talked a lot about therapy and working to be a good person," says Pinilla.



Pinilla and her father, Felipe, attended the Primerus Global Conference in Paris. Felipe is a founding partner of Pinilla, González & Prieto Abogados and is currently the vice chair of the Primerus Business Law Institute of Latin American and Caribbean.

For Pinilla, a deep understanding of her clients and their needs is as essential to succeeding as is knowing the law.

"You also have to be very sensitive about people," she says. "You have to be patient. You have to know who the person is and how you can talk to them. You have to know the internal part of the person if you want to win the case, and that's when I think the psychology of my mother did its job."

Born in La Calera, a town some 10 miles outside of Bogotá, Pinilla grew up in a country house where she developed a love for nature and for reading. She was a toddler when her father took over the law firm her grandfather started, and she remembers seeing stacks of case files in the living room. The law office was in a house that her father inherited, and quarters were tight. The conference table barely fit in the room. His first secretary was her grandmother. He took whatever cases came through the door.

Some 25 years later, Pinilla, González & Prieto Abogados has grown from a fledgling firm that narrowly had enough office space to fit a conference table into a now 60-lawyer firm that occupies a leading role in the Urban Development, Zoning, and Real Estate sectors in the Colombian market.

And his first client – a construction company – is still with the firm.

Though Pinilla's childhood was quiet and secure, armed conflict increasingly became a concern, and when she was 13, the family moved to Chía, a northern suburb of Bogotá. They had to be cautious of traveling without security and the school wouldn't allow field trips that were outside the capital city.

"My parents managed it very well," says Pinilla. "They showed calmness, even if they were not calm."

Nonetheless, Pinilla says the blanket depiction of Colombia as a country plagued with violence is inaccurate and oversimplified.

"It is an unfair issue for all Colombian people," she says. "We understand where it comes from, but I think it's unfair. Most of the people here are people that work, that are good people, that help each other a lot."

In high school, Pinilla took part in a student exchange program that took her to Germany for a semester. She lived with an exchange family in a small, rural town some two hours south of

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Laura Pinilla De Brigard and her husband, Camilo Sepulveda, have been married 11 years. He is also a criminal lawyer and runs his own firm.

Stuttgart and became proficient in German. She felt welcomed and fit in easily.

“The experience opened my mind,” she says. “It gave me independence. It helped me to know me and to know my abilities. It was very special.”

After high school, Pinilla studied law at the Universidad del Rosario in Bogotá. Upon completing the 5-year program, she secured an internship with a criminal law firm, where she met her future husband, Camilo Sepulveda.

At the end of the internship, Pinilla joined her father’s firm, becoming only the third criminal lawyer in the large firm.

“I feel that my father and I have always worked very well together because in many issues we think very similar,” says Pinilla, adding that she learned the importance of discipline from him and the necessity to have a deep understanding of each case. “He taught me that if you want to defend someone related to a real estate issue, you have to understand real estate law.”

He also taught her to be honest and straightforward, she says.

In 2015, Pinilla became a specialist in Criminal and Criminological Sciences through Externado de Colombia University.

As one of the few female attorneys in the country practicing criminal law, Pinilla says it is important to “make your place.”

“You have to be firm. You have to be strong,” she says. “You have to be willing to go to places that some people don’t want to go. You have to do much more than be at a computer writing documents.”

She says you have to love the work. And clearly, she does.

“I love litigation. I love to be in hearings and to manage the process and to think about strategy,” she says. “I connect a lot with the clients’ needs and I love to work to make them feel safe and supported.”

Pinilla and her husband, Camilo, have been married 11 years and have two children. Camilo is also a criminal lawyer and runs his own firm.

An aspect of Pinilla, González & Prieto Abogados that Pinilla greatly appreciates is that the firm values family and encourages its attorneys to have a life away from work – to be a full human being and not just a lawyer.

“I wanted to be a present mother,” she says, “and I think the firm is very humanitarian and sensitive. The structure of the firm allows people to have their own lives. It has been very important to me and to many other lawyers of the firm.”

The firm embraced remote working long before the COVID-19 pandemic and Pinilla says the arrangement has allowed her to be available to her children and has allowed other attorneys to take care of elderly parents.

“The firm has been very understanding of people’s needs,” she says.

In 2020, Pinilla and her mother co-authored a children’s book, a dream project the two of them had discussed for years but never got around to until then. But after the lockdown was lifted during the COVID-19 pandemic, Pinilla noticed her children were nervous about going back to school.



Attorney Laura Pinilla De Brigard and her mother, Natalia, have co-authored several children’s books, including “Toti Returns to School” and “Toti Says Good-bye to Grandma.”

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In response, she and her mother wrote "Toti Returns to School," a story that helps children go back to school with a safer and happier attitude. The mother-daughter team followed up with "Toti Says Good-bye to Grandma," a story that helps children deal with grief.

"We want the books to help children to live and to understand some situations that are important to them," says Pinilla. "We think the books help a lot to do that. When you identify with the character of the book, the child understands I am not the only one living this. There are some opportunities to manage it. I can do something about the situation."

The books are written in Spanish, German, and English and are available on Amazon. A third book about bullying is in the works.

Pinilla, González & Prieto Abogados has been a Primerus member since 2012. Pinilla attended her first Global Conference last October in Versailles, the historic French city just outside of Paris.

"I felt very connected with all the lawyers because I think we really share a lot of values," she says.