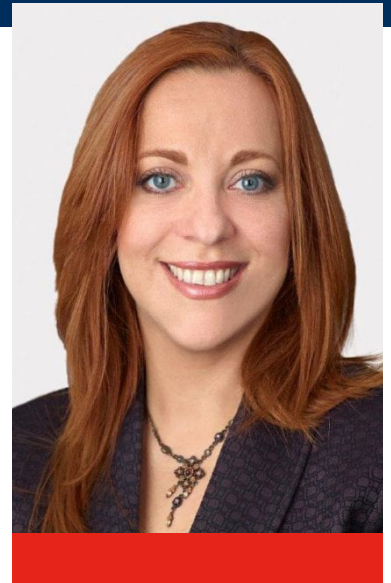


# From humble beginnings as a Cuban exile, attorney now guides Miami law firm



By Brian Cox

Florida attorney Jacqueline Calderín has a piano in her living room that her parents bought for her when she was 7. That second-hand piano — purchased on layaway — is a reminder of her parents' sacrifices, their commitment to education, and of the family's odyssey as Cuban exiles.

Calderín's parents left Cuba when she was only a year old and her sister was a mere 40 days. The young family was among thousands of middle-class Cubans from 1965 to 1973 who uprooted their lives to board "Freedom Flights" to Miami.

"We left thinking we were going into exile, which is different than a lot of immigration to the United States," says Calderín, who is passionate about a history she says few people outside of the Cuban-American community know. "Our families really believed we were going back at some point."

In Miami, her parents were forced to rebuild their lives from virtually nothing. A diamond cutter before the Cuban Revolution, Calderín's father found factory work, as did her mother, who had studied business back in Cuba. Her parents were determined to preserve their language and culture for their children, which is why Calderín remains fully literate in Spanish, her first language.

"It was very important to them that we be well educated and rounded," says Calderín. "My mom and dad worked in a factory, but we had piano lessons and we went to cotillion and we had etiquette classes."

There was little money for "extra" things, but Calderín remembers vacations in the family Chevy Impala.

"We never knew that we were poor," she says. "We never felt it."

Her family's experience as exiles and later as immigrants is a foundational block of Calderín's identity and acted as a foundry for her future values, both personal and professional.

While drawn to the performing arts in high school, Calderín knew she was expected to pursue a career that her parents would view as practical and stable. Her sister became a teacher. Calderín took three years of pre-med at Barry University on a science scholarship before realizing medicine was not her calling

and transferring to Florida International University where she majored in English and Spanish Literature.

"As much as I wanted to be a doctor in my mind, I think I was trying to let my dad live vicariously through me because he always said he should have gone to medical school," she says.

After earning her degree, Calderín gave some consideration to applying to a few MFA programs, but at that point she was newly divorced and the young mother of two daughters and she decided she needed to find a more reliable career path.

"When you have kids, you grow up overnight," she says. "Everything you do from the moment they're born, every decision you make is fashioned around how is my decision going to impact my children."

She knew she was a good writer and had always been able to argue her way out of anything. She took the LSAT on a whim, she says, but it proved a smart decision. At the age of 29 and with two small children, Calderín enrolled at the University of Miami School of Law.

While she thought initially that she might practice copyright law because of her degree in English, Calderín soon learned that she found the subject too dry. An internship with a bankruptcy judge sparked her interest in the field. She enjoyed the opportunity it afforded to practice both transactional and litigation work. She later interned at the U.S. Trustees' Office and when she graduated from law school, she accepted a position with a bankruptcy trustee who was a partner at Arthur Andersen, one of the "Big Five" accounting firms at the time.

"And that's just the way my career path opened," she says. "I became a business lawyer never having really read a balance sheet. It was a natural fit for me."

The job offered Calderín the flexibility she needed as a young mother. Remarried by then and with a third child, Calderín wasn't interested at the time in a position with a larger law firm that brought an expectation of high billable hours.

"I really believe you can have it all, but you can't be a partner at a firm billing 2,400 hours a year and be a good parent. It just

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doesn't work," she says.

When her son started the first grade, Calderín joined Kluger Peretz Kaplan & Berlin, a law firm of around 60 lawyers. She was a 37-year-old associate who felt she had some catching up to do and a lot to prove. Somehow, she tapped into an inexhaustible source of energy and three years later she made partner.

"As hokey as this sounds, I was always a believer in you can't stop," she says. "You've got to keep walking and as you walk you'll forge your own path. I was never overwhelmed with where my path would lead me. I just kept walking."

In 2007, the path led her to starting a new firm with the attorney who had hired her as an associate, Bob Charbonneau, and another partner. It was a scary proposition, Calderín admits, but she didn't hesitate to jump at the opportunity.

Too many people are paralyzed by a fear of failure, she says.

"I don't have a fear of losing anything," she says. "My parents lost everything and started from scratch here. I was broke going to law school. If I lost everything now, so what? When you don't have that fear of losing something, you can do anything."

Starting out small, the new firm steadily grew. Calderín expanded her practice of representing debtors, committees, secured creditors, and purchasers of assets in the areas of bankruptcy, insolvency, and restructuring in both in-court and out of court proceedings.

"I love to work with small to medium-sized companies because it's very gratifying to me to save a business and keep people employed," she says. "I have dozens if not hundreds of success stories of companies that have come to me thinking they were going to liquidate and just needed to get out, and we ended up reorganizing them, rebalancing and restructuring their balance sheet, and keeping families employed."

When one of the founding partners left in 2018, the law firm dissolved and reformed under Calderín, Charbonneau, and Christopher Spuches. The three attorneys christened the new firm Agentis.

"I had a vision for what I wanted the firm to be," says Calderín. "I wanted the firm to be a place where a woman could go on maternity leave, for example, and come back if she wanted with a reduced workload. I wanted to be at a firm where we had that flexibility."

She also wanted a firm where names didn't mean anything and where ego wasn't associated with the firm. Hence, the name Agentis, which in Latin means advocate as well as "powerful," "efficient," and "effective."

Calderín personally identifies with those adjectives.

"I know that I have the expertise and the knowledge to

provide good results and that when I take risks for my clients, they're very calculated risks," she says. "When I give my clients advice, I'm empowering them to make good decisions for their businesses. I have a good track record to prove that.

Now the managing partner of Agentis, Calderín says the essential key to maintain a successful law firm is judicious hiring.

"You want to make sure you hire people who fit into your culture and who are decent people," she explains. "At the end of the day, if you surround yourself by people who are decent and kind and have people's best interests at heart and are team players then you have built a very solid foundation for success."

Calderín also stresses the importance behind running the firm as a meritocracy.

"We hire solely based on meritocracy," she says. "When you treat people by rewarding good behavior, people want to do better. People like recognition. Our compensation model is based purely on meritocracy. I think that having a compensation structure based on 'you reap what you sow' has been extraordinarily important to our culture and to our success."

Calderín sits on several nonprofit boards, including chairing the New World School of Arts Foundation, which works to attract under-represented youth to the arts. Her service on the board is a direct act of giving back.

When Calderín was first starting law school, she couldn't afford to continue dance classes for her youngest daughter, Lauren, at the Miami Conservatory (now the Armour Dance Theatre, where Calderín presently sits on the executive board). The conservatory offered to cover the costs, and her daughter eventually received a scholarship to New World School of the Arts and then went on to attend Duke University. Lauren is now a doctor.

Calderín has never forgotten the gesture that changed the trajectory of her daughter's life.

"I decided that when I became an empty nester, these were the boards I wanted to serve on and the causes I'd support, ones that provide for kids who are talented and motivated the opportunity to excel as artists," she says.

Her oldest daughter, Daphne, is a health care lobbyist working and living in Washington, D.C. and Nevada, and her son, Zachary, works for a NASCAR race team in Tennessee.

As a mentor to younger attorneys, Calderín emphasizes the importance of nourishing connections with family and friends.

"Looking back, what I couldn't have done without is my people," she says. "It's important to not wait to live your life until you're done with your career goals because you can do it all and have a much richer life if you take care of your relationships."