

Former prosecutor makes smooth transition to criminal defense work with noted New Jersey law firm



By Brian Cox

New Jersey criminal defense attorney Stacey Zyriek Enriquez knows how to be resilient, tenacious, and driven because as a child she witnessed her mother model those qualities when she unexpectedly became a young, widowed parent of two daughters.

Her father's sudden death when she was 8 and her mother's formidable response to the loss served to shape the backbone of who Zyriek Enriquez is as a person and as an attorney.

"I was young, but I knew how devastated and heartbroken my mother was," recalls Zyriek Enriquez. "Yet, within a month of my dad's passing, she found a job and worked very hard for the next 30 years of her life to provide for my sister and me."

The loss of her father also instilled within Zyriek Enriquez a clear understanding that no day is a guarantee and a commitment to live life to its fullest.



Zyriek Enriquez with her mother, Maria Luz Zyriek Enriquez, and sister, Lauren Zyriek Enriquez.

Her parents met while working for an airline where her mother, Maria, was a flight attendant and her father, Gary, was a pilot. The couple married a year later and, though Maria was from Guatemala, they settled down in Gary's home state of Alabama where they lived for more than a decade. When Zyriek Enriquez was 4, her father chose to give up flying, which had required him to be away from home far too much, and the family moved to Guatemala in order to be nearer to her mother's extended family in Guatemala City.

"We were a very tight-knit family," says Zyriek Enriquez, who spent her childhood weekends among cousins, aunts, uncles, and her grandparents in Guatemala. She also visited her father's family in Texas and Alabama during her summer vacations.

On occasion, everyone would visit a farm her grandparents owned that was hours away from the city and could only be reached after a lengthy car ride and then by horseback. More than 100 years old, the farm had no power and other modern amenities, but Zyriek Enriquez recalls days spent on the family farm with great fondness.

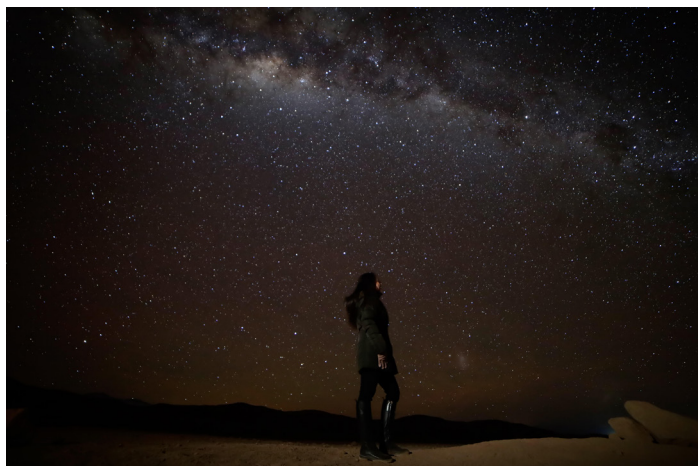
It was through her grandfather, who was a lawyer, that Zyriek Enriquez got her first "job" in a law office.

"He would let me spend time at his firm, and pretend that he was giving me serious assignments, like typing documents on a manual typewriter," she says with delight. "He made me feel special."

What is more, Zyriek Enriquez was impressed with how her grandfather was able to help people through his practice of law and dedication to providing pro bono services to the underprivileged community in Guatemala.

"I got to see firsthand how being a lawyer could have a great impact on people's lives, which inspired me to become a lawyer," she says.

Former prosecutor makes smooth transition to criminal defense work with noted New Jersey law firm



Zyriek Enriquez enjoys traveling and immersing herself in local cultures. Among the most awe-inspiring places she has visited is the Atacama Desert in Chile where she went stargazing.

After Zyriek Enriquez's father died, her mother found work at a university and then with the government. She eventually became a diplomat and when she was offered a position as the Consul of Guatemala in New York, she took it.

The announcement that they were moving back to the U.S. was a bit of a shock to Zyriek Enriquez, who was 16 at the time.

"I came from being part of a tight-knit family and a close circle of friends to suddenly my mom saying we're moving to New York," she says. "I was extremely sad and also terrified."

It was an emotionally difficult transition to leave Guatemala where she was surrounded by friends and family to begin a new life in Hackensack, New Jersey, where she knew no one except her mother and older sister, Lauren.

"It almost felt like it was the three of us against the world," she says.

But she soon embraced her new home's diversity, which was so different from her experience in Guatemala. The people who became her friends in high school were from all over the world. She had friends from Bulgaria, Albania, Iran, and elsewhere.

"I loved learning about different cultures and traditions," she says.

Despite the early challenges of adapting to a new country, Zyriek Enriquez excelled in high school and went on to study criminal justice at Rutgers University, where she began eyeing a legal career.

The financial commitment of law school, however, caused Zyriek Enriquez to carefully consider the choice. "If I was going to go to law school, I had to be 100 percent certain that I wanted to be a lawyer" she says. "My mom always instilled in us that we needed to be self-sufficient and be able to depend on ourselves. She also stressed the importance of picking a career we enjoyed."

To answer that critical question, she decided to find a job with a law firm after graduation. She didn't have much luck initially because of her lack of experience in the legal field. As she continued her search for opportunity, she took an administrative position with a gas company. It was a casual conversation with a doorman that led to her meeting Patrick A. Mullin, a successful criminal defense attorney who lived in the same building.

A well-established solo practitioner, Mullin offered to hire Zyriek Enriquez part-time in the evenings. She jumped at the chance, and for the next several months, after her day job at the gas company, she worked at the law firm until late into the night and Saturdays as well.

"I convinced him of how eager and dedicated I was to gain legal experience," she says. "My mom always said, you can do anything you want as long as you work hard at it, and I was definitely willing to do so."

Mullin, who handled mostly complex federal criminal cases, took Zyriek Enriquez under his wing and became a mentor, which she was very grateful for. "Mullin was an incredible litigator," she says. "He was extremely hard working, ethical, professional, and respectful. No matter its size, he considered every case just as important as the next."

After two years, Zyriek Enriquez was convinced that being a lawyer was her calling. She attended New York Law School in Manhattan while continuing to work for Mullin part-time.

After passing the bar, Zyriek Enriquez clerked for the Superior Court in the criminal division for a year. She then joined the



Zyriek Enriquez on Lanzarote, one of the Canary Islands off the coast of West Africa.

Former prosecutor makes smooth transition to criminal defense work with noted New Jersey law firm



Zyriek Enriquez and her new fiancé Jason Sensale, in Asbury Park.

Union County Prosecutor's Office as an assistant prosecutor, starting in the appellate division and eventually working her way through a host of units, including juvenile, special victims, and narcotics.

"I took full advantage of all the opportunities working for the government could provide," she says. "I was also very eager to try cases as I wanted to gain experience as a litigator."

Zyriek Enriquez tried more than 20 cases, ranging from narcotics distribution and firearms offenses to violent offenses such as robberies, aggravated assaults, homicides, and sexual assaults. The valuable trial experience she gained during that time honed her skills as a trial attorney, and in 2018, she was certified by the Supreme Court of New Jersey as a Criminal Trial Attorney.

Zyriek Enriquez also served two years as a Special Assistant United States Attorney in the U.S. Attorney's Office in the District of New Jersey, where she was assigned to the violent crimes unit. During this time, she led several investigations and prosecutions of narcotics distribution, weapons offenses, and violent crimes, all of which had impactful results in communities of New Jersey.

It was during her time at the U.S. Attorney's Office that she met and befriended Robert C. Scrivo, a veteran assistant U.S. Attorney and special counsel whom she came to greatly respect and whose opinion she valued. Not long after, Scrivo left the U.S. Attorney's Office to co-chair the White Collar and Criminal Defense Practice at Mandelbaum Barrett PC.

Last year, Scrivo called Zyriek Enriquez with a question: Would she consider moving into private practice and joining him at Mandelbaum Barrett? He pitched the firm as being comprised

of highly qualified litigators, collegial, family friendly, and committed to contributing back to the community. As she gave the offer thought, it became clear to Zyriek Enriquez that it was the right time for a change.

"The time came when I wanted to bring the same level of dedication and advocacy that I brought to the victims of crimes and representing the government, to clients in private practice."

Zyriek Enriquez values the firm's support and celebration of diversity and inclusion, and says, "I feel that I am where I was meant to be."

It was a smooth transition from prosecutor to criminal defense attorney. Her experience and skills as a litigator were transferable, of course, and she approaches cases with the same outlook. Zyriek Enriquez strongly believes that being able to properly analyze the strengths and weaknesses at the outset of a case is crucial in arriving to an appropriate resolution.

Being bilingual has proved tremendously beneficial as well toward establishing trust with clients who find reassurance in communicating in their native language.

Zyriek Enriquez brings to her practice a philosophy she learned all those years ago as a new college grad working late nights at Mullin's criminal defense firm, which is to treat every single case with the utmost importance.

"When clients come to us – especially if they've been charged with a criminal offense – they are facing one of the most challenging times of their lives. I want to guide and counsel clients, while zealously advocating on their behalf."

Passionate about traveling, Zyriek Enriquez gets back to visit family in Guatemala as often as possible and has visited approximately 25 countries. She recently returned from the Atacama Desert in Chile where she was awed by the canopy of stars at night. While traveling, she enjoys immersing herself in the country's culture, from its food to its entertainment. Several years ago, she attended the Military Tattoo at Edinburgh Castle in Scotland where hundreds of military bands performed on bagpipes.

Zyriek Enriquez also has a sense of adventure, having gone sky diving three times – the first time was on her 21st birthday.

She is always up for the next challenge.

"As I said, live life to the fullest," she says with a laugh. "No day is guaranteed."