

# Difficult upbringing helped shape mindset of attorney

By Brian Cox

Rodolfo Rivera remembers the moment the course of his life turned toward a more promising future. He woke up on the day he was to begin seventh grade with the realization that he wanted to be a lawyer and that to become one he would have to study harder in school.

Rivera describes the moment as an epiphany.

"It was like finding Jesus," he says. "I didn't want the life of the factory. It's not the work I wanted."

Rivera, who goes by "Rudy," grew up in Lorain, Ohio, where his grandfather worked for U.S. Steel, the city's major employer. He lived with his mother and sister in a small apartment on 28th Street, across from the steel mill and above a country-western bar called the Sierra. The second-hand furniture in the apartment was sometimes propped up with coffee cans. He remembers mornings on the way to school when he and his sister would have to step over men passed out on the sidewalk in front of the bar.

"It was a rough neighborhood," he says. "There were more bars in my neighborhood than probably the rest of the city. I learned every Hank Williams and Charlie Pride tune."

His mother, Louisa Martinez, was originally from the Dominican Republic. She married Rivera's father in Puerto Rico, but when his abuse became too much she left with the children for Lorain where her parents had settled.

"She only had a sixth-grade education," says Rivera, "but she knew education was important. Although she could never help with homework, she was 'you better study.' In her mind, she knew that was a way out."

With his mother unable to work because of a back injury, the family lived on food stamps and \$150 a month from welfare. Rivera helped out where he could, shining shoes in local bars for 25 cents a pop.

"Toward the end of the month it was slim pickings," he says, recalling standing in line for government cheese and peanut butter.



Rudy Rivera greets children at an orphanage in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where he did pro bono work, helping facilitate adoptions.



It was a hardscrabble life, says Rivera. He remembers watching men leave the steel mill and head straight for the bars. It was sometimes dangerous on the street and fights were not uncommon. He knew he wanted something different from life and education was the way to get there.

When he told people he wanted to be a lawyer, many cautioned him that he was setting his goals too high. What if he didn't make it?

"I just kept saying there is no such thing as not making it," says Rivera. "I was all in. I felt like there is no way I could change my mind. That was the goal that motivated me."

Others occasionally encouraged his ambition. Once, while shining shoes at Mill Tavern, his drunk client asked why Rivera was shining shoes and the boy told him he was saving money to buy a desk that he could use for studying. The man got up, led Rivera to nearby Mars Furniture and bought him a desk for \$45. Rivera cherished the desk for decades before letting it go.

"That desk held a special place in my heart," he says.

The first positive role model Rivera credits with helping shape the man he would become was Brother Cyprian Kittel of Sacred Heart Chapel. The Catholic church was an anchor in the community because it was primarily Hispanic and served as a center of support and activity. Brother Cyprian assigned Rivera the role of church commentator, which required the young boy to address a congregation of hundreds during morning mass every Sunday.

"You lose your fear of public speaking," says Rivera, who is now a frequent keynote speaker with several TED Talks under his belt.

Brother Cyprian told Rivera to aim high. If you don't make it, he advised, you'll land somewhere in the middle. On the other hand, if you aim for the middle, you could end up at the bottom.

"He was a truly genuine man who loved his work," says Rivera.

"He was truly a man who had so much kindness in his heart."

With Brother Cyprian's advice running on a loop in the back of his mind, Rivera excelled at school, joining the high school wrestling team, working on the school newspaper, and becoming class president.

His hard work and dedication paid off when he received a full-ride scholarship to Ohio Northern University, where he was captain of the wrestling team. After graduating, he applied to St. Louis University School of Law where he was accepted on the condition that he pass a summer course in contracts.

"It was Affirmative Action that allowed the door to open for me, but it was my effort that was going to keep me in the room," says Rivera.

When Rivera was admitted to the law school after succeeding in the summer course, he remembers meeting with the dean and admitting he had no way to pay the tuition.

"I never thought about how I was going to pay for law school,"

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he says. “I said, ‘Dean, I don’t have any money,’ and he looked at me as if I was a unicorn.”

The dean deferred tuition and set up Rivera with a job at the reference desk in the law library. Rivera also got a second job at the YMCA.

Out of law school, Rivera hung out a shingle in St. Louis, where he didn’t know anyone and set about building a practice.

“I did whatever came in the door and could pay a fee,” he says.

In time, a large part of his practice developed into facilitating international adoptions. He was one of the few lawyers working in the field. The work provided him valuable experience with navigating foreign civil law systems and collaborating with lawyers from different countries – experience that in 2007 attracted the attention of Fidelity National Financial, Inc., which approached Rivera about overseeing the building of its international operations. They were interested in his language abilities and his knowledge of overseas matters.

Despite knowing little about title insurance, Rivera decided within five minutes to make the leap from a solo practice in St. Louis to inside counsel for a Fortune 500 company based out of Jacksonville, Fla.

“I always had the mindset to just go do it,” says Rivera. “If you worried about failure, you would never do anything.”

Now as chief international counsel, he manages a multimillion-dollar national and international litigation budget on a combined exposure of more than \$250 million with an 80 percent success rate.

“I learned a very valuable lesson in this journey,” says Rivera. “Knowledge is not wasted. Whatever it is you do, at some point or another you are going to use it.”

Primerus proved a valuable resource for Rivera, who had to develop a network of lawyers quickly as he built Fidelity’s international operations.

“I use Primerus to expand my network,” says Rivera. “One of the reasons I go to Primerus events is to meet lawyers. The best way to evaluate a lawyer is in a social setting. You get to know somebody, you get a feel for them as a person and as a lawyer.”

Rivera is a regular speaker at Primerus events, discussing what he looks for in outside counsel. He says it is always case specific, of course, but he has a few basic rules: Don’t lie to him; do good work but let him know if a mistake is made; and return his call within 24 to 48 hours.

“They are very clear and simple rules,” he says, “but you’d be surprised how many people don’t follow them.”

Rivera is conscientious about reviewing and authorizing outside counsel invoices quickly, promising prompt payment. In return, he expects outside counsel to serve as not just a vendor, but as someone working with him in partnership.

“I think part of my job as inside counsel is to have them trust me – one, that they’re going to get paid and two, that I have their back as I expect them to have my back,” he says.

The foundation of the working relationship he looks for is centered around confidence and trust.

“You have to instill confidence in people no matter what,” he says. “People have to feel like they can trust you. Outside counsel can trust I’m going to be fair, I’ll be direct, they’ll always know where I stand. I’m not going to make up stuff and I think they like

knowing where they stand.”

A black belt in judo, which he learned when he was living on the tough streets of Lorain, Rivera is a three-time national champion and is an instructor at a friend’s school. He believes judo helped nurture his mindset with how he approaches challenges, both professionally and personally.

“I tend to be very laid back,” he says. “I don’t get worked up about a lot, and I handle a lot of cases that are extremely stressful.”

His philosophy is that more can be gained by being relaxed and laid back than by being aggressive. He equates his legal style to the judo approach, known as “the gentle way,” of using an opponent’s balance against them.

In addition to collecting fountain pens and smoking cigars, Rivera has discovered a passion for producing podcasts. He has a YouTube channel called “Conversations with Rudy,” during which he interviews a guest. His first podcast, appropriately enough, explored the concept of mental toughness with a longtime childhood friend. Other interviews have involved an economist discussing the recent sanctions on Russia; a woman who escaped from a cult; and a doctor who was treating refugees going into Poland.

“I’ve always liked the radio,” he says. “Reaching out to people is something I like to do so I’ll start a conversation. Given the chance, if you’re not threatening to people, they will talk to you and tell you things. Sometimes people just tell me general things and other times they tell me things that are really personal.”

He’s also recorded several TED Talks in conjunction with the Association of Corporate Counsel master classes, including “From Public Assistance to a Fortune 500 Company,” “Diversity and Inclusion Is Good for the Bottom Line,” “The Beauty of Knowing a Second Language,” and “The Value of Mentorship.”

In addition, he’d like to write a book encapsulating the lessons he’s learned through life. One chapter might be about how he views his success.

“Success is relative,” he says. “It’s how you measure success that matters. I feel very lucky and very blessed.”



**A black belt in Judo, Rudy (left) is a three-time national Judo champion. He is pictured here with Judo Grandmaster Kyung Sun Shin, the highest ranking black belt in the country at the time.**