

# Honduran attorney took a fresh approach in building her law firm



By Brian Cox

It is not hyperbole to characterize Marielena Ulloa de Pineda as a legal trailblazer and visionary.

As the founding partner of Ulloa & Asociados in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, Ulloa has been a leader in raising and redefining the expectations of the legal profession in her country since she launched the firm more than 20 years ago.

"I was the first one in the country that took being a lawyer as a service," she says. "I brought a different approach to being a lawyer in Honduras. I knew it was important to recognize that I was rendering a service and was aware that I was providing solutions to people."

At a time when it was customary for Honduran lawyers to be unavailable to clients during siesta or after 5 p.m. or on the weekends and to be more cavalier about response time, Ulloa established a practice that was driven by catering to clients' needs, which required an unprecedented sense of urgency and dedication.

Some viewed the ground-breaking principles upon which she built the culture of her firm as disruptive and radical. Ulloa merely saw it as modernization.

"I started changing the approach in the legal community," she says. "Now, it is the 'new' normal that you answer when your client calls you, because they have a problem they need to solve, but 20 years ago that was not exactly what would happen."

In the early days at Ulloa & Asociados, it was necessary to require attorneys to answer clients' inquiries within 24 hours because it was an unconventional expectation across the profession. Now, Ulloa says the requirement is unnecessary "because it's very natural for us to answer right away."

She also led a transformation of how law firms view transparency with clients. Traditionally, Honduran law firms disclosed very little to their clients about legal processes and procedures and zealously guarded their navigational knowledge of the judicial system. But Ulloa was determined to "remove the mystery."

"Everybody knows what to do and the clients have copies of all the information we have and know what our next step is," she says,

adding that her new goal is to be able to allow clients direct access to their files on the law firm's computer system.

Improving efficiencies and refining processes were at the top of Ulloa's mind when she started her firm in 2002 and continue to be an ongoing focus. In 2008, Ulloa & Asociados became the first law firm in Honduras to attain ISO-9000 certification.

As an uncompromising woman with dramatically innovative ideas for practicing law, Ulloa faced significant resistance from her peers and other law firms. Behind her back they called her "the ISO lawyer" and worse.

"You have to be very determined and very strong in order to develop a law firm," says Ulloa, who is still the only woman heading up a law firm in the country. "It's been very challenging. People think they can tell you what to do, but that is not going to be the case when I'm fighting, which is almost every day of my life. I'm not afraid of anything."

It's not surprising, in one sense. After all, she grew up in San Pedro Sula with five brothers and sisters, which taught her to be assertive and outspoken and unabashed, much to her mother's chagrin, she adds with a laugh.

Though her father was a well-respected dentist in San Pedro Sula, the family has produced lawyers for generations. In fact, several years ago Ulloa discovered cases on file with the Supreme Court of Honduras that her grandfather had worked on, including the first deed of purchase filed in 1945 for a family that 80 years later is one of Ulloa's clients.

There was never much question in Ulloa's mind that she would be a lawyer.

"I have good friends from kindergarten who say I was a lawyer since I was born, I just didn't have a law degree," she says with delight. "It may be why I am so passionate about what I am doing."

After graduating from the National Autonomous University of Honduras in Tegucigalpa with her law degree, Ulloa began her career as legal director for Cargill, a multinational food corporation based out of Minnesota and among the largest companies in Honduras. She was 24.

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“You have to take on challenges,” says Ulloa of the tremendous undertaking. “And I did.”

At Cargill, Ulloa had the budget to hire the best law firms but often found them expensive and unsatisfactorily responsive. She remembers visiting outside attorneys’ offices to check on the progress of cases and watching them lift the case file from the same place they had put it down the last time she visited.

“They hadn’t done anything about it, and they would tell me the same story month after month,” says Ulloa. “They were so in love with their performance that they didn’t bring any service.”

She knew then that if she ever decided to go out on her own, her firm would be different.

After a little more than five years with Cargill, Ulloa and her husband, Reynaldo Pineda, had their first child and she decided the amount of traveling her job required was too much. She chose to become an outside consultant for a time before joining Ernst & Young as an associate.

In 2002, she founded Ulloa & Asociados in San Pedro Sula. The firm began with four lawyers and is now the largest law firm in Honduras, with a branch in the country’s capital of Tegucigalpa.

The firm benefited from Ulloa’s unconventional decision to open her first office in San Pedro Sula, which is in northern Honduras and is the nation’s industrial center. Most firms have their main office in Tegucigalpa, which is home to the government, but lacks the economic engine that runs in San Pedro Sula where the businesses are located.

“We grew quickly and one of the things that helped us a lot is that we developed a quality system within the firm,” says Ulloa. “We are very well known to be orderly, to be loyal, and to be honest.”

The firm specializes in corporate law, mergers and acquisitions, labor law, and tax advisory. It remains committed to developing better ways of working that promote efficiency and quality of services and has a reputation for being “tech-forward.”

Ulloa continues to embrace innovative processes that differentiate the firm from its competitors. She was the first law firm to establish a hybrid billing system and to bill in U.S. dollars. She hires attorneys rather than contracting with them so that she can ensure they reflect her values and dedication to client service.

“We employ administrators with the highest degrees and levels of experience,” says Ulloa. “We have developed a team that has expertise in many areas.”

She has changed her approach to hiring over the years. In the beginning, Ulloa says she was impressed by resumes and diplomas, but has learned that she would rather hire good, honest, and loyal people who are qualified.

“In the end, I’d rather have somebody who’s a good person because it’s easier to train them,” she says. “For many years we have been preparing people to be better professionals. I can’t invest in making a bad person a good person.”

Ulloa met her husband while working at Cargill and they have been married for more than 30 years. He is an engineer. Their two sons, Reynaldo Emilio and Gabriel Emilio, are both lawyers, who after graduating from the Universidad de San Pedro Sula - USAP now work for law firms in the U.S.

While her sons were at university, Ulloa volunteered as the director of the law school at Universidad de San Pedro Sula. After six years, however, she decided the demands on her time were too much when she found herself on a conference call with the board of directors while sitting in an Istanbul airport at 3 a.m.

Being a trailblazer has never been easy and as a pioneering woman, Ulloa has encountered resistance and reluctance from many people over the years, including her own mother, who never understood her daughter’s drive and often told her that she worked too hard and traveled too much.

“It’s something that I want to do, and I want to develop,” Ulloa explains. “It makes me happy. All my life I’ve been dedicated to being a lawyer. I was born to do it.”



**Marielena and her husband, Reynaldo, met while working at Cargill where she was the legal director and he was an engineer.**