

## CBA Magazine - June 2009

### The Art of Balance

By Patrick Markey

Anita Alvarez, the first Hispanic female CBA President, is focusing on expanding CBA services. Alvarez, who was elected Cook County State's Attorney in November 2008, had spent 22 years as a prosecutor before she ran for the top job and bested six Democrats in the primary and then handily won the general election. Prior to becoming States Attorney, Alvarez already had a distinguished legal career in the office that she now heads. She served as the Chief Deputy State's Attorney, Chief of Staff to the Former Cook County State's Attorney Dick Devine, Chief of the Special Prosecutions Bureau, Deputy Chief of the Narcotics Bureau, and Supervisor of the Public Integrity Unit. Her list of awards is long. In 2001 she was named Person of the Year by Chicago Lawyer Magazine. In 2002 she was the recipient of the Professional Achievement Award from Chicago-Kent College of Law. In 2005 Alvarez was named Person of the Year by the Latin American Police Association and also named States Attorney of the Year by the Illinois State Crime Commission.

Alvarez's most famous case was her successful prosecution of what the media labeled the "Girl X Case" in 2001 which gained national attention. Girl X involved the sexual assault of a 9-year-old-girl who was left paralyzed, blind, without speech and confined to a wheelchair after her brutal attack in the Cabrini Green housing project. There was no physical evidence linking the defendant to the girl, so both the victim and defendant were crucial witnesses. This was an extremely challenging task for Alvarez and her trial partner, now Cook County Judge William O'Brien, given the victim's tender age and inability to speak. The girl testified using a communication method designed especially for her by speech therapists. She used her eyes and head to answer yes or no questions, and spell out words. Alvarez slowly called out each letter of the alphabet with the girl raising her eyes at the appropriate letter of the alphabet to spell out words. According to Former Cook County State's Attorney Dick Devine, "It was probably the most powerful testimony ever heard at 26th Street. Anita and Bill worked so hard on the case. Anita was able to put her on stand because they developed a level of trust with the girl. They still keep in touch with her to this day." Devine also described Alvarez as "bright, full of integrity and very caring." "She has a remarkable record as a prosecutor and is outstanding in the courtroom." There is no shortage of admirers of Alvarez who see her as someone who obtained her achievements through hard work and her own merit. Chicago Attorney, Ray Koenig III, who was a strong supporter of her campaign for State's Attorney stated about Alvarez "She is a remarkable person and has been the underdog her entire life. What you see is what you get with Anita." United States Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, Patrick Fitzgerald, stated "Anita is a great partner in traditional law enforcement efforts as well as in efforts to reduce violence through other means. She will make a terrific President of the CBA." Raised in Pilsen Neighborhood Alvarez was born and raised in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago and attended Maria High School where she currently serves on its Board of Directors. One of three children, she grew up in a close knit family. Her father passed away when she was 12 years old, so Alvarez's mother became the sole source of support for Alvarez and her two siblings. Alvarez's mother worked as a seamstress to support her family. "My mom worked very hard as many single parents do to support us and to keep balance in our lives. She always stressed the importance of education and she pushed me to study hard and to pursue higher educational opportunities." Alvarez majored in social work at Loyola University and attended Chicago-Kent College of Law. Her choice to go to law school and ultimately work for the Cook County State's Attorney was a continuation of her desire to help people most in need of help. Anita Alvarez raised her right hand and was sworn in as the first female and first Hispanic Cook County State's Attorney before a standing room only crowd at the Chicago Cultural Center on Dec. 1, 2008. Cook County Circuit Court Judge Joseph Urso, a longtime friend and mentor to Alvarez, administered the oath of office as her family looked on. Alvarez is married to Dr. James Gomez and they have four children. Her son is a sophomore at the University of Illinois at Champaign. She has twin girls, age 11 and a 10 year old son. How was she able to keep up with all these commitments? "My family helped out quite a bit. My husband has been very supportive of my career." "Sometimes I also took my oldest son to CBA judicial evaluation meetings when they were held on Saturdays." Outside of work and family, Alvarez is a die-hard Chicago White Sox fan. She will throw out the first pitch at the Sox game against the Detroit Tigers on September 25th. Alvarez has completed three Bank of America (former LaSalle Bank) Chicago Marathons with a personal best of a very respectable 4:12. She still enjoys running in local community sponsored races from 5Ks to half marathons although it is becoming difficult to find the time with her busy schedule. Alvarez is also excited about the CLE she is hosting in Cancun, Mexico during President's Day Weekend in February 2010. CBA Involvement Alvarez's first active involvement with the CBA was in 1993. She was recruited to the CBA Judicial Evaluation committee by Circuit Court of Cook County Judge Vincent Gaughn who believed that more states attorneys and public defenders needed to be involved in bar associations. She served on the Judicial Evaluation Committee from 1993-1998 and was also on its executive committee. In 2002, she was asked to be on the CBA nominating committee. In 2003, she became a member

of the CBA executive board and in 2005 was elected secretary for a two year term. In 2007, she won the race for second vice-president. " [Former CBA President] Kevin Durkin was a big reason I stayed involved in the CBA...it is so hard to say no to Kevin." Durkin first met Alvarez when they both served on the Judicial Evaluation committee and they have been friends since that time. "When I met her, I saw her as an amazingly smart, hard working lawyer. If there was something that needed to be done, she would do it. She was so generous with her time even though she had a high position in the State's Attorney's office and had her role as a hockey mom. I am very proud to have her as our new CBA president." Alvarez found involvement in the CBA to be a nice break from the isolation which can come from working at 26th and California. "I enjoyed meeting lawyers from big firms and other areas of law that I would not normally meet at 26th Street." Alvarez has also been a frequent speaker at seminars, participating in the CBA's Trial Superstars lectures and the annual Breaking Barriers seminars. Technology tops the list of Alvarez's goals during her presidency as exciting new advancements are scheduled including the debut of the new Media Center on the CBA's existing web site. Among its features, the Media Center will enable members to access information from all committee meetings online. Those meetings that feature a speaker will actually be webcasted live so that members can view the meetings via the web and potentially receive CLE credit. Those that do not feature a speaker will be archived allowing continuing access for all members. "This service is going to be a huge benefit for our existing membership and we are very hopeful that new members will see this as a very helpful and exciting feature as well," Alvarez said. In addition, Alvarez noted that the Media Center will feature recorded presentations by attorneys that can be accessed and viewed by members on a wide variety of topics that will include trial tips for personal injury cases, handling real estate closings, protecting legal data and "cyber law" issues. "The global practice of law is changing so much and the CBA has many members in other states and even other countries. This feature will make it much easier for those members who live or work outside of the Chicago area to stay involved and in touch with us." Reaching Out to Government Lawyers Membership issues will also be a priority for Alvarez and she plans to capitalize on her job as Cook County State's Attorney to try to reach out and expand the membership of government attorneys who have historically been underrepresented in bar associations. She sees the CLE Advantage program as one major benefit to government lawyers who can obtain all their CLE at one low flat rate. Another project that Alvarez will be working on will be the expansion of public education cable television programs which are produced by the CBA's Television Committee and air throughout Chicago on public access Channel 19 and many suburbs. The programs are designed to educate the public about the role of lawyers and judges and the court system. Alvarez will host several shows and will be involved in the planning and production of up to 26 shows over the course of the year. In a continued effort to expand public outreach, Alvarez said the CBA will be working on creation of a special area on the web site dedicated to providing information for the general public about important legal issues. The site will feature easy-to-access information on issues such as bankruptcy, mortgage foreclosure, identity theft and resources for victims of crime. "We have so much tremendous talent within our association and I would like to tap into that talent to try to reach out and make the law more meaningful and accessible to the general public," Alvarez said. The most remarkable twist of fate in Alvarez becoming President of the Chicago Bar Association is the story of her father. Before he died, Anita's father, Alfonso Alvarez, was the head waiter at the restaurant formerly known as Binyons (now the Plymouth Restaurant) located right next door the CBA building at 327 S. Plymouth Court. He undoubtedly served and had contact with many former and current CBA members and perhaps more than a few CBA presidents. Little did Mr. Alvarez know that his youngest daughter, Anita, would someday lead that organization as its 133rd President. I am sure he would be very proud.