

DEVINE TAPS ALVAREZ

DEVINE TAPS ALVAREZ TO HEAD BUREAU OF SPECIAL PROSECUTIONS

CHICAGO SUN TIMES (IL)

Copyright 2004 ProQuest Information and Learning. All rights reserved.

July 2, 2001

Taking on the tough cases

Sadovi, Carlos

When Anita Alvarez was a young girl growing up in the Pilsen section of Chicago, her mother would warn her to avoid the Cook County Jail just a mile away.

The prison and the hulking Criminal Courts complex at 26th and California loomed over the heavily Mexican-American neighborhood of low-slung bungalows and two-flats, just higher than the spires of St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church, where she went to school and attended mass.

"She'd say, 'Don't go around there,'" Alvarez recalled. "If we were going anywhere, she would always say be careful, go up 25th Street so we wouldn't pass the jail."

Fortunately for Alvarez, she didn't listen to her mother.

The 41-year-old prosecutor who helped win the Girl X case was recently named by Cook County State's Attorney Richard A. Devine to head the department's Bureau of Special Prosecutions.

The U.S.-born daughter of a Mexican immigrant father and mother, Alvarez holds the highest post a Hispanic has ever held in criminal prosecutions in Cook County. She has worked under four different state's attorneys at the office since 1986. Among other positions, she worked in the public integrity division and was the deputy chief of the narcotics bureau.

Alvarez now heads nearly 80 prosecutors in the auto theft, organized crime, public integrity, arson, and financial crimes divisions.

Devine said Alvarez was picked for the spot because she had shown leadership qualities and has shown her grit by taking on tough cases such as Girl X, involving the brutal 1997 rape and attempted murder of a child in the Cabrini-Green public housing complex.

"She is a combination of an experienced trial assistant who can lead other people," said Devine. "She combines the best of a good aggressive prosecutor and a warm personality."

Alvarez was the first in her family to attend college, earning her undergraduate degree from Loyola University and her law degree from Kent College of Law. Her father, a waiter, died when she was 12 years old. She and her brother and sister were raised by her mother, who worked as a seamstress putting together hospital uniforms.

As she stood inside St. Paul's on Hoyne and 22nd Place, a towering Gothic brick church where she attended mass as a child, she discussed the role of the courts. She likened the courtroom to a church, with its ritual and need for reverence and respect.

Alvarez now oversees the gang unit, which is among the largest and busiest in the department, where she tried cases as a young prosecutor for several years.

In a city with the nation's third-largest Hispanic population, that means a significant number of the defendants are also Hispanic. She said that as a Mexican American, she feels particularly troubled with so many Hispanic gang members going through the system.

"It's disheartening. You see the numbers and you see that these young kids are shooting themselves and killing themselves for nothing," said Alvarez. "For what? To defend the honor of the gang- that's nonsense."

Over the years she has had people criticize her by saying that as a minority herself, she shouldn't be putting so many Hispanics and other minorities in prison.

Alvarez argued that her job is to bring closure to cases and give answers to victims' families who are looking for justice. "I remind them that my victims are also either black or Hispanic," she said. "I can't even remember the last time I had a white victim."

She recalled a case where a young man was killed after being mistaken for a gang member. The man's family had only been in this country for a few years, searching for a better life.

"The parents were so distraught and didn't understand. They ended up moving back to Mexico," she said. "The parents wouldn't even come back here for the trial, that's how devastated they were."

As part of her new responsibility, she's also overseeing the department charged with ferreting out and prosecuting corruption in public offices and police departments, including Chicago. These institutions should serve as examples and be devoid of any corruption, she said.

Last year, Alvarez helped put away Chicago police officer John Labiak for 16 years for his role in shaking down residents of some \$8,000 and drugs. She took over the department just weeks before four city workers and one of their wives were charged with defrauding the Streets and Sanitation Department of more than \$100,000.

"People generally don't like to work on those cases; they are very touchy cases that require a lot of attention," she said. "But I think those are necessary, they're serious."

She also is beginning with some unfinished business. The department is having to re-examine the case of Lori Roscetti, a Rush Medical College student who was raped and killed in 1986. The department sent about 50 pieces of evidence recently to be retested after recent DNA tests on semen did not match four men convicted in the attack.

Other unfinished business is today's scheduled sentencing of Patrick Sykes, who was convicted of raping and poisoning Girl X. The girl was left unable to speak or use her hands and is nearly blind. Alvarez called the case one of the most difficult of her career. She took on the case after the first co-prosecutor left the office to become a judge.

Two days after Sykes' conviction the girl had her birthday, and a few weeks after that Alvarez and her co-counsel, William O'Brien, watched her graduate the eighth grade.

O'Brien is chief of the Narcotics Bureau, where Alvarez served as his deputy for two years. He called her a tireless but fair person who has a keen knowledge of the prosecutor's office. He said her personality is well-suited for her new role.

"She's a bridge builder," said O'Brien. "What you will get from her is her sense of professionalism; you don't want to cross her."

"She's a tireless worker, she was a great partner."

What makes her work worthwhile was summed up when Girl X sent Alvarez and O'Brien a card thanking them for convicting Sykes. The card was written for her by the girl's mother.

"She said, 'Thanks for believing in me,'" said Alvarez. "She felt she had a big weight off of her shoulders."

Anita Alvarez—who grew up not far from this Pilsen corner, Hoyne and 22nd Place—is the first Hispanic to lead Special Prosecutions.

Copyright Chicago Sun Times Jul 2, 2001