

AN INTERVIEW WITH MYRNA PEREZ, DIRECTOR OF THE BRENNAN CENTER'S VOTING RIGHTS AND ELECTIONS PROGRAM

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Myrna Pérez is the Director of the Brennan Center's Voting Rights and Elections program and is a lecturer-in-law at Columbia Law School. Ms. Pérez is the recipient of several awards, including the Puerto Rican Bar Association Award for Excellence in Academia, the New Jersey League of Women Voters "Making Democracy Work" award, and distinction as one of Hispanic Business's 2014 "50 Hispanic Influentials."

Note: This interview has been edited and condensed.

During my time as an intern at the Brennan Center, it was clear to me that you really placed a strong emphasis on being a mentor to others. Could you tell me about the role that mentors and role models have played in your life?

A big civil rights role model for me is Al Kauffman formerly of MALDEF—but I think we should be thinking even more broadly about this question. The people you admire and can call on are important, but there are also people who more indirectly got you where you are.

There's a big group of people out there who had a choice to make and they chose me. There's some admissions officer at Yale, for instance, who changed my life. I got an award early on in my time at the Kennedy School that I'm not positive I was the most qualified for, but once I won it, I put myself on a trajectory of doing everything I could to feel like I earned it. I got a fellowship that allowed me to go to Columbia Law School and have it paid for as long as I was doing public interest work. One of the women there saw something in me and trusted that I would live up to expectations.

These experiences influence the way I interact with young people to this day. I respond very well to high expectations, and I hope that the young people I work with get that the standards I put on them are high because I believe in them. It's a lot easier to not care how they do. But to push someone to reach their potential and help them get over what they're afraid of can be huge for them. And if they fail, they'll do better next time.

You've dedicated your life to public service and are very clearly a cause-driven person. How do you make change happen? What is your own theory of change?

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You cause change by applying the right kinds of pressure, incentives, and punishments to induce behavior. It's about figuring out what motivates people—considering their limitations, strengths, and perspectives—and leveraging that to get things done. Some people don't want to be sued; others don't want bad publicity. Some want to be praised; others want to be part of the action. I see everything that way in all that I'm doing, from recruiting people for a soup kitchen that I run to getting my church to get out there for Jersey City Pride. Saying it aloud makes these interactions sound transactional, but I don't experience them that way and I don't think others do.

You need to be able to find a way to break through whatever it is that's competing with people's time or discouraging them from being inspired. That's how you reach people. Everybody can be a change agent. When you get a win, it teaches you how to get other wins. Wins beget more wins.

I was lucky: I got some wins pretty early in life that made me think, "I can do this." One of my earliest ones was for my aunt, who's severely developmentally disabled. The science and customs—the decency and humanity afforded to someone in her situation—weren't what they are today back when she was growing up. On top of that, you have to understand that my grandparents were very, very poor. They had eight kids in total and it was really hard for them to take care of her. Back then, someone like my aunt was more likely to be put in an institution than to receive social service support.

One day, my family learned that my aunt had been severely abused by one of her caretakers. At that point, I'd spent a summer on Capitol Hill, so I did what I knew how to do: I started calling our Congress members and told my mom to call her state legislative representative. We kept it up and eventually, my aunt was moved to a smaller group home, which functioned much more like a family in a closer, more pleasant and safe environment.

My aunt was put into a bad situation because of a series of system failures. She was born into a system failure. Given where we were and what limitations we had, it's about as happy an ending as one could hope for, short of turning back time.

Again, you need to know who to pressure and how to tell them to do this. Ask yourself what is it that I want to achieve, who can give it to me, and what is the most efficient way I can explain to them our mutual goals.

**What legal tools are the most effective for pushing for social change?
Litigation? Advocacy? Both, synergistically?**

I love being in court but at the end of the day, I am acutely aware of the fact that there are kids starving to death in this world, mothers with no houses, elderly people who are alone, refugees who are stateless, and so forth. I feel that it is incumbent on me to be a very good steward of the resources I've been given, knowing that every volunteer, dollar, and press hit I get is one that another important cause isn't getting. I have to make sure I use those resources efficiently and well.

I develop strategic, emotionally agnostic views on which tools are best in any given situation. It just depends; litigation and policy aren't going to work the same across different moments or states. There's a saying that if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. I don't only carry hammers because the world isn't full of only nails. I also think doing the daily work of moving hearts and minds is important.

What, in your mind, makes a legal case particularly tough?

I struggle over instances in which I know that filing a case is not going to win but filing it would matter to the people who have asked me to do it. It's especially hard when I think the case isn't strategic or a good idea on top of being unwinnable. It's very hard to tell somebody, "I see you and I'm so sorry. This is horrible and unjust, but going to court just isn't going to do anything for you" and have that stick. I'm mostly hard-nosed about this because of the opportunity costs, but I do feel bad about not being able to provide solace or respite to someone feeling overwhelmed with nobody to turn to. I eat that guilt, but I feel it.

You're passionate about myriad social justice issues. Why and how did you choose to specialize in voting?

The great civil rights historian, Taylor Branch, called voting a "piece of nonviolence." In other places, military violence and coups determine who's in charge. Here, voting is how we resolve political disagreements and differences.

I really believe in the vote. I like the idea of people coming together in a way that is actually selfless, given that the benefit you get for your one vote is very attenuated. What it does for you directly is a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a benefit, yet people do it anyway. Voting is a belief in your power, alongside that of your fellow citizens. It's the understanding that you have to care about your community and country. I appreciate what it stands for and what it is functionally.

I also really like that the law around voting is strategically challenging. It's always evolving, and striking the right balance is never easy or foregone. Is voting a group right or an individual right? Is it a symbol? An action? Is it a right or privilege? All these questions have implications. Wrestling them out is very intellectually exciting. There's some real brain work that goes into making it coherent.

This area of the law is, of course, of profound importance to communities of color, both historically and today. But the viewpoints of those communities aren't always well-represented in the legal field. How does your work—and the work of the Brennan Center's Democracy Program more broadly—amplify historically marginalized voices?

A lot of the work that the Brennan Center does is on behalf of communities of color. We work with groups that serve them, are them, or represent them. We amplify voices to certain audiences, making sure that those issues are recognized

as *American* issues and values. We can always do better, but there's definitely an inclusion and racial justice lens animating what the voting team does and why we do it.

How do you think legal practitioners can build more diverse and inclusive workplaces?

I believe we should strive to increase the number of people of color that are in a workplaces. A workplace changes and the culture and atmosphere of that workplace change when you are actually and meaningfully diverse.

There's always this debate, when you have limited resources and can't optimize them all at once, about improving retention and culture versus increasing recruitment and how an organization should spend its energies. I think recruitment and hiring is the most important. I acknowledge that having a bad retention policy or culture will thwart good recruitment efforts, but I also think that really strong and aggressive recruitment efforts can displace and minimize the impact over time of people in that workplace who are not contributing in a productive way to the workplace culture.

If you had to vocalize a mission statement for your life, what would it be?

My church's mission statement is to love, honor, and welcome people in the way that Jesus Christ did. That's not inconsistent with my own mission. I have a basic lens toward race and class in my work, but it's certainly not limited to that. I want to make the world a safer place for people who are poor, marginalized, and discriminated against.

How do you stay driven and hopeful in the midst of the onslaught against our democracy and our current political climate?

The question shouldn't be "how do you stay hopeful," but rather "how do you keep *motivated*?"

When I look at the arc of human history, I see that some people spent the majority if not all of their lives in a really dark time. Some people lived or didn't through the Holocaust, extreme famine, slavery . . . I think you can be both incredibly, profoundly disappointed about this country and think "okay, this is bad—now what am I going to do about it?" I am very pessimistic and sad about where we are now, but I'm also hyper-motivated to keep fighting.

We're playing the long-game here. I really believe in that MLK quote—that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice. I don't feel entitled to the world that I want to live in. I recognize that I might not live to see it; I probably have more birthdays behind me than ahead of me at this point in my life. I'm not sure where the world is going to end up when I'm not on it, but I don't do things with the expectation that I'll see the benefit in my lifetime. I do things in the hope that someone one day will see the benefit of what it is that I'm trying to do. I've

got to do my best and work as hard as I can now, because even if I don't achieve what I want to, I'll bring someone after me that much closer.

I'm a church person. I feel like I know how this all ends. Love wins. God wins. Justice wins. Part of the beauty and mystery and challenge of my faith is that I know the beginning and the end, but God expects me to be part of the middle, and that middle is writing itself out right now, with me. That's what motivates me.