



Spotlighting



Manuel Medrano Inspiring a New Generation of Viewers

By Patrick Folliard

Growing up in the blue-collar barrio of El Paso, Texas, Manny Medrano watched black-and-white episodes of "Perry Mason" with a singular intensity: That this attorney could crush a witness on cross-examination, or rivet jurors with a compelling closing argument, appealed to the extrovert in Medrano; that his onscreen idol wore a coat and tie impressed upon him that life offered alternatives.

Undoubtedly, the old television series—young Medrano's only exposure to the law—inspired him to become a trial attorney. Ironically, though, Medrano not only became a success in the courtroom, but also in the medium that first exposed him to law: television.

"Harvard Law School and 13 years as a [undefeated] trial attorney in Southern California unwittingly prepared me for a career in television," says Medrano, who has been ABC-TV's Washington-based Supreme Court and legal affairs correspondent since 2004. Before that, he was a local legal reporter at KNBC in Los Angeles for 10 years. "Law training taught me to think analytically and to write with a Spartan style, and jury trials made me more comfortable and effective as a communicator."

Medrano first came to public attention as an assistant U.S. attorney for the Los Angeles U.S. Attorney's Office, where he successfully prosecuted the high-profile 1985 kidnapping and murder case of Drug Enforcement Agent Enrique Camarena. Afterward, Medrano continued as a litigator at Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal in Los Angeles, and occasionally appeared on local television as a legal expert.

"My goal was never to change careers. At the time, I wanted to make partner, and I thought by being on TV, I might bring in work from the networks," says Medrano. "Then KNBC's news director offered me the job as its first-ever legal reporter."

After taking weeks to decide, Medrano accepted in 1994, figuring if he failed miserably on television, he could return to firm life. Within months, O.J. Simpson was arrested for murder and Medrano became a familiar commentator. He provided the station with legal analysis and opinion on the trials of Simpson, the Menendez brothers, Reginald Denny, Rodney King, and others.

When Medrano was hired by ABC to cover the Supreme Court, he realized the dream of every local television reporter by landing a spot on the network. The married father of two boys soon learned the job was vastly different from reporting local news. His new

position entails reporting cases with far-flung impact, translating decisions into stories that are comprehensible and relevant, and identifying newsworthy cases by reviewing Supreme Court and legal publications, as well as hundreds of the petitions for cert filed with the court.

It was not until this year that Medrano learned he was the first Latino in the history of the U.S. Supreme Court press corps.

"I was surprised...and honored to be the first. More than ever it drives home for me that I'm a role model for young Hispanics, and that I want to work hard and do a superb job in light of that responsibility," says Medrano. "Simply put, by doing what I do every day on television, I like to think I can give hope to other Latinos. And for non-minority viewers, I wish for them to understand that not all Hispanics are the negative stereotypes seen on TV, but rather many of us constitute an important part of the fabric and diversity of our nation."

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