

## A Talk With...

# Denise Torres

By J. Marcos Perales Piña

*Denise Torres is an attorney with specialties in alternative dispute resolution and personal injury litigation. She is a former president of the New Mexico Trial Lawyers Association. Her legal work in New Mexico is highlighted by her commitment to serve as the chair of the Judicial Performance Evaluation Commission. It was a pleasure interviewing her and sharing her experiences.*

*What would be one of your recommendations for new attorneys coming into the practice?*

Be yourself. We all would like to be accepted for who we are. Start now. If you are not comfortable in your own skin, others will notice too. This includes being unafraid to admit things that you don't know. In this business, you can hurt people with lack of skill or knowledge. Realize there are many people who are willing to help you, and ask for it. Most lawyers who have been practicing for a long time recognize that young lawyers are our future and that it is our responsibility to help those coming up behind us.

*As a trial attorney, do you have any tips for attorneys that want to go in this field?*

We all have a special gift to share. Don't work against your nature. If you don't enjoy the litigation process of depositions and trial or don't receive some fulfillment from the experience, there are other ways to make a living. There are other areas of the law that you may enjoy, like research and writing. You can still be involved in the litigation processes and not make the courtroom your focus. However, for those born to be trial lawyers, find a good mentor with the time, skill and patience to teach you how to litigate a case from start to verdict the right way. A large part of my practice in the last several years has been serving as a mediator, and I see all too often plaintiffs' attorneys failing to maximize the value of their cases by failing to serve discovery, fully answer discovery, and file motions to narrow issues or to pre-admit important evidence. There is no shortcut to being a good trial lawyer, and at times you can feel overwhelmed. I think the feeling of being overwhelmed dissipates with experience because you learn that you will get the work done, one piece of paper at a time. Whether you are interested in representing plaintiffs or defendants, nothing takes the place of old-fashioned hard work.

*What would you tell someone who comes from a small town in New Mexico and wants to be an attorney?*

If I can do it, anyone can. I come from ranchers and farmers in the Truth or Consequences, Winston, and Monticello area—very hard working folks, without a lot of education or financial means to help pay for the cost of higher education. Therefore, focus on getting very good grades in high school and undergraduate school. Good grades will increase the probability of grants and scholarships. I had a presidential scholarship for undergraduate school and a national Hispanic scholarship for law school. Also, not needing a lot of sleep will help too! I worked as many hours as I was able while in college and law school.



*What earlier experiences have you had that helped you throughout your career?*

I have already mentioned old-fashioned hard work and that I grew up farming and ranching, so I learned through the adversity and seeming unfairness of Mother Nature washing away freshly cut hay, or the lack of rain wreaking havoc on livestock needing to graze. On a different note, eating ramen noodles for every meal during college, deciding if you need gas for your car or gas to heat your apartment because you can't afford both, and begging college professors to let you earn extra credit to bring up a grade so you won't lose a scholarship. All of this helped me realize that to succeed you must have tenacity and perseverance and you can never, ever give up. The sacrifice made during the journey will be well worth the effort.

*How can you explain to someone who is getting into practice how you communicate professionally with other counsel?*

New Mexico is such a small legal community that you will develop a reputation in short order whether you mean to or not. How you communicate with others will be one part of your reputation. If your opponents advise their colleagues to make sure all communication with you is in writing, then that is not a good sign. We can all have a bad day and we can all hit "send" on an e-mail too soon. Several bad days can start a less-than-favorable reputation. Most of us know when communication with opposing counsel is going south. My first inclination is to pick up the phone and clear the air. Some have a