



César Perales

[by Regan Morris]

When César Perales took over as executive director of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund two years ago, it was a triumphant homecoming. LawCrossing speaks to Mr. Perales about how the PLDEF has expanded its mandate to fight for justice for all Latinos.

In the early 1970s, Perales was an idealistic attorney fresh out of law school and eager to change the world. With two like-minded attorneys, he founded the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (PRLDEF) in 1972.

Two years ago, after several decades in public interest and private sector positions, Perales returned to the center he founded—and he has been lauded for bringing the organization out of near financial ruin. Raising money for the nonprofit group is a big part of Perales' job (LawCrossing met him at a unique fundraiser through the Latino Film Festival in New York).

Perales, who was born in New York, not Puerto Rico, said he was inspired to start the center because he saw many Puerto Rican children being ignored by the public school system and many adults struggling to seek justice. Puerto Ricans, Perales said, had no voice in the city's public life.

"There was a lot of interest in the '60s and '70s about civil rights," he said. "Other groups were forming organizations, and there were three very young lawyers at the time who wanted to start a legal organization that would bring lawsuits that would impact the Puerto Rican community."

PRLDEF's first case was with *Aspira*, a youth education and development group that wanted to help Puerto Rican children learn to speak English in public schools. *Aspira v. New York City Board of Education* forced the school system to stop ignoring non-English-speaking children and implement bilingual study programs.

"The analogy which was made incidentally by the United States Supreme Court was it was like ignoring deaf children," he said. "And that you wouldn't do that. And that you could not just ignore kids who don't speak English."

The case impacted countless Puerto Rican children and other Spanish-speaking students, who had been ignored until they could learn English on their own. New York's Latino community was dominated by Puerto Ricans during the 1970s, he said.

"While we're still called the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, we are much more pan-Latino than any other group, because in New York, we have such a diverse group of Latino nationality groups," he said.

The group has also championed migrant rights, voting rights, and employment rights cases for Latinos, including two class-action lawsuits against the New York City Police Department to increase the number of Latino officers.

Recently, the group won a victory for Mexican day laborers in New Jersey, winning the immigrants the right to stand in a public places looking for work.

"In a town called Freehold, New Jersey, they actually started ticketing people standing on street corners looking for work because the local community was very upset by the thought of these people standing around," he said. "We actually brought a lawsuit to establish the right—it was a Constitutional argument—that they had the right to free expression. And we won."

In between his careers at PRLDEF, Perales moved to Washington at the end of the Carter administration and served as an assistant secretary. He then became New York State Commissioner of Social Services and was deputy mayor of the city under Mayor David Dinkins. He also spent eight years as a senior vice president at New York Presbyterian Hospital.

Returning to PRLDEF was a happy homecoming for Perales, and news of his return garnered much attention, including a full-page article in the *New York Times*.

"I've had a lot of fun coming back and trying to rejuvenate this," he said. "The reason I got a lot of attention when I returned was because the organization was in serious trouble in terms of their ability to raise money. And people were seeing the place as less relevant. And I've been here two years, and I think we're well on our way to reestablishing ourselves."

The group's mission is to litigate cases that have a big effect on the Latino community. Perales oversees six staff attorneys and dozens of *pro bono* attorneys from some of the biggest law firms in the country.

As members of a territory of the United States, Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States. But perhaps the biggest issue facing PRLDEF concerns non-citizens and their ability to hold driver's licenses and other forms of identification.

"Increasingly in the last 10 years, it's been the fact that there's this giant group of



people who are immigrants coming from Latin America. That today is the biggest issue we're facing, not just the Northeast, but in the whole country," he said. "And what do we do about people who are here undocumented? We spend a great amount of time fighting over the issue of driver's licenses being taken away from people who were not here legally. It became a much bigger issue after September 11."

Perales said the political debate around undocumented workers has flopped in the last few decades and that the laws need to be fixed. Companies need the workers, but without documents, the workers can be easily exploited.

"Most of the business people, including Republicans—they want to be able to use the labor entering the country. A lot of poor people, less well off, are the ones against

immigrant labor because they fear it will affect their wages," he said. "They also don't want to compete for housing. But if you're rich, you understand the need for labor in this country. Unemployment keeps dropping; we're down to five percent in this country. We don't have enough people to work in this country. We need people."

Although PRLDEF is primarily a litigating group, it also conducts educational seminars and the occasional study. Most recently, it reported on the low number of Latino judges in the United States. The group was disappointed that President George W. Bush did not choose the first Latino for the vacant Supreme Court seat.

"But I think I would have been even more disappointed if he would have named a very conservative Hispanic," he said.

Perales said attorneys and law students interested in public service should ask their law schools about loan-forgiveness programs. Many law schools are starting to forgive a part of a law school loan for every year an attorney works in public service. Perales sees it as a growing trend.

"For people who are interested in public service, the most important thing, I think, is that you get up in the morning and you want to get to work," he said. "If you don't want to get up in the morning and go to work, there's a problem. You're going to be miserable throughout your life. So if what turns you on is doing public service, there are ways to find it."