



Cristina Velez: Freelance Legal Researcher; Adjunct Professor, Florida State University; Tallahassee, FL

[By Megan Rellahan]

Cristina Velez broke all boundaries and became a lawyer. Leaving New York City behind, she discovered a perfect balance between her artistic life and her legal career in Tallahassee, FL.

After finishing her undergraduate program at Wellesley College, Velez, whose pen name is Nina Parrilla, viewed the world as a place filled with unlimited opportunities. Having an adventurous spirit, she spent the bulk of that summer in Boston Common reading, writing, and contemplating her next chapter. As a woman who values her free time to write poetry and live life to the fullest, Velez followed in the footsteps of her favorite poet, Martin Espada, whose work as an attorney showed her that she could lead, as she puts it, a bifurcated life.

“There were several factors that made me want to pursue a J.D.,” said Velez. “First off, I love reading, researching, and writing. Several people who knew me well thought that law school would be a good fit for me. Also, I knew that with a J.D., I could do many things; and I wasn’t just restricted to practicing law. And I knew that as an attorney, I could work part time and support myself. I really value my free time and knew I wanted to do many things. Being a lawyer fit my goals.”

Velez took the LSAT and applied to Columbia University, where she was accepted.

“Columbia was a good fit for me for many reasons. I knew I wanted to do work in the human rights/international law field and Columbia has an amazing program. I also wanted access to [the School of International and Public Affairs].”

“And I wanted to live in Manhattan. Just as much as I wanted to learn about law, I wanted to be exposed to more poetry and to the vibrant community New York offers,” explained Velez.

When Velez’ boyfriend graduated from Columbia University and moved to Tallahassee, she often visited him. While there, Velez spent most of her time outdoors biking or hiking. She missed that in Manhattan, along with the more relaxed lifestyle Floridians seemed to live.

Throughout Velez’ second and third years at Columbia, she worked at a small plaintiff-side employment discrimination/personal injury practice and loved every minute of it.

“I got my hands dirty, and it just let me know that I couldn’t do big-firm work,” stated Velez. “I liked interacting with clients too much to let myself be swamped in paperwork. I also liked knowing that I was directly helping someone.”

Having spent time working at a big firm in D.C. as well, within two weeks, Velez said that she knew big firms were not for her. After exploring all of her options during school, when graduation neared, Velez made the decision to leave the big city behind and join her boyfriend in Tallahassee.

“The cost of living is cheaper, the lawyers work fewer hours, and, in general, they seem to have more control of their time,” explained Velez.

“I didn’t want the hectic life. I didn’t want the commute. I wanted to be able to lie on grass and have a flexible work schedule. New York didn’t seem to offer that. Big firms certainly didn’t offer that.”

In Tallahassee, FL, Velez landed a job working three days a week for an

employment discrimination practice, where she assists people such as the elderly, women, and religious groups. At Florida State University, Velez also teaches a course entitled Genocide and International Law.

“I love my students because they make me look at the topic from 40 different ways and also because a good chunk of them feel compelled the way I do,” said Velez.

Velez’s poetry reminds her of why she is practicing law. According to Velez, “I cannot disconnect the artist I am from the law I practice. I cannot try to make the world beautiful through art and then undermine it by working for a law firm that defends companies that harm the environment or people.”

“You are what you do,” said Velez. “If you do worthy work—work that contributes to the world in a positive way—everything else falls into place. The present is fleeting, so enjoy it to the fullest. Eat good food, drink good wine, and spend time with good friends. However, make sure that whatever you do, you are creating something lasting.”

ON THE NET

Florida State University
www.fsu.edu

Columbia University
www.columbia.edu

Wellesley College
www.wellesley.edu