



Angelica “Meli” Carrion: On Fighting Crime as an ADA

[by Teresa Talerico]

After searching the San Antonio streets for a homeless woman who was the victim of an assault, Bexar County Assistant District Attorney Angelica “Meli” Carrion came to a disheartening realization. The woman was far too confused, scared, and uncommunicative to testify against her alleged attacker. But Ms. Carrion and her partner forged ahead, relying on testimony from an eyewitness and a police officer. A jury convicted the defendant, who was already on parole for burglary.

“Most people would have been discouraged and maybe would have just dropped it,” she said. “We knew what he did was wrong, and he might have even known and thought since she was homeless, he would have gotten away with it. We were able to help her, but also help other people that maybe would have been victim to him in the future.”

For Ms. Carrion, those things make her job worthwhile. She has handled everything from assault and deadly conduct to felony drug and narcotics cases. In two high-profile cases, she secured the conviction of a local judge accused of driving while under the influence of the sleeping pill Ambien and also prosecuted the case of a policeman arrested for DWI. A 2001 graduate of St. Mary’s University School of Law in San Antonio, Ms. Carrion has always wanted to be a prosecutor.

Q: What attracted you to this work?

A: I can remember as far back as college knowing this is what I wanted to do with my law degree. It’s something that’s always been part of me for a long time. I think what draws me to it is the realization of how important it is to live and function in a safe and orderly environment. When it comes to crime, our laws are in place to protect the public as a whole and to maintain a sense of order. When laws are broken, I believe people should be held accountable. Otherwise, the community and its families become vulnerable and susceptible to danger. By holding people accountable for their actions, a standard of accepted behavior can be set

in the community. A good assistant district attorney is somebody that’s firm and fair, and that can be a challenge. I always thought that this would be something I would be good at, being able to balance both: being fair, but also being very firm.

Q: You started out at the DA’s office as an intern. Is that the best way to get your foot in the door?

A: For me, it was a very flowing thing. I started my internship when I was in law school. I became familiar with it through the career services department at my school and also just being here in San Antonio. Once I was there for 2 ½ years and established myself, it turned into this position as an ADA. Now that I’ve been a lawyer for three years, it’s been almost six years since I’ve been in this office. The best way to go about doing it would probably be an internship or a clerkship for a judge or for the DA’s office.

Q: What do you learn as an intern?

A: I was assigned to three more experienced prosecutors. The prosecutors I interned for were felony prosecutors. They handled really big cases--murders and robberies, your bigger cases. I did a lot of research. I did a lot of drafting motions. A lot of times they may not be the most glorious things. As law students, we always kind of just want to jump into things. It was important to learn these things because these are the things they dealt with day to day, the research, the preparing cases, and a lot of drafting motions and things of that nature. Had I not had that when I started

as an assistant DA, it would have been a lot more difficult..

Q: Your job has been glamorized in shows like “Law & Order.” What are the real pluses and minuses of the work?

A: By far, the most discouraging aspect of this job is when you see the same faces coming through the system over and over again. The system is designed to punish people for crimes they committed or to deter the commission of crimes. There are also rehabilitating services that we have; there are different kinds of drug treatment, courses, community service, and counseling. But sometimes those services don’t work. It’s not because they’re faulty. It’s usually because there’s a deeper, fundamental problem with repeat offenders. A lot of times it goes so far back to people’s upbringing and their families. When you see the same faces coming through the system over and over and over, it’s just sad. You don’t see that on TV.

When it comes to the plusses, they actually tend to be very similar to those on TV. Crime affects people and families and entire communities, but whenever justice prevails, it can be very rewarding because you get a sense that you’re helping the community.

Q: What’s one thing they should teach in law school that they don’t?

A: They teach the law, but they don’t teach you how to be a lawyer. My school had what we called clinics where you could actually get a hands-on approach on what to do day



in and day out as an attorney. That's not something that I did. If I were back in law school, it would be something I'd want to do. If you're not exposed to that, you just don't really know what to actually do when you walk into a courtroom. There's a difference between knowing the law and knowing how to be a lawyer.