

Immigrant lawyer lends skill, will to a cause

He fights for the underdog

BY DAVID H. GARCIA-PINO
Herald Writer

For Attorney Leoncio de la Peña, law is more than a way to punish evildoers or defend the righteous — it also has become a way to serve the community.

De la Peña is a founding member and senior partner of the De la Peña & Bajandas law firm, a political mover and shaker and an activist for the rights of neglected and abused children.

It's a busy life, but a satisfying one behind his real joy — his wife Lourdes and baby daughter Sofia.

De la Peña does not take anything for granted, which is why he seems so bent on being involved in community efforts and politics. His humble beginnings as a Cuban migrant have a lot to do with that, he says.

"I'm an immigrant. All immigrants have a drive to succeed — that's what makes this country successful," he says.

His most visible community service is with Voices for Children.

In 1984, three Juvenile Court judges founded the group to support court-appointed advocacy for abused, abandoned and neglected children.

De la Peña serves as one of 27 members on its Board of Trustees, each of whom are committed to supporting abused children through the Guardian Ad Litem Program.

Composed of volunteer advocates who represent abused children in Miami-Dade, the program provides financial assistance and other resources.

"We are very much on a partnership level with Mr. de la Peña," says Nester Rodriguez, executive director of Voices for Children. "He wants to work on behalf of the children everywhere, and we are grateful for



QUIET GIVER: Attorney Leoncio de la Peña blends community responsibility with professional success.

his talent to our cause. [He] has continued his efforts for the well-being of the children in all of the cases he has handled."

De la Peña's leadership, Rodriguez says, has played a central role in shaping the organization.

Again, de la Peña can look back at his experiences yesterday as a source of motivation for good deeds today.

A Miamian since 1969, de la Peña reunited with his father and brother in the United States after they fled Cuba behind him.

"I thought my parents were brave to take us out of Cuba," says de la Peña. "When I became a father I realized the sacrifice they'd made of separating themselves from [us]."

Determined to find a way to fight for the underdogs, de la Peña went to the University of Florida and graduated cum laude from his class in 1981 with a degree in economics.

He then went to Nova Southeastern University where

he received his law degree in 1984.

"I always believed I would be successful," says de la Peña, who often enjoys a challenging game of golf, or listening to jazz singer Miles Davis in his free time. "But I didn't understand the responsibility and hard work that would come with being successful."

By the early 1990s, de la Peña was working to help foreign investors in the United States, most specifically in Miami.

"South Florida is booming due to South American investors," says de la Peña, whose firm handles more than 70 percent of its total cases outside the United States.

The company's reputation has attracted clients from as far as Asia.

That means the company — and de la Peña — need a range of expertise.

His specialties include defending foreign business owners in U.S. legalities and

vice versa.

The firm has represented clients in diverse civil litigation areas such as shareholder derivative claims, securities arbitration and complex fraud and deception cases.

"We run this law firm as a business and we tend to the needs of our clients," de la Peña says. "Our interest is to serve their interest."

But, he adds, "overnight success takes 15 years of hard work."

"Hard work" to de la Peña also means getting involved on another level — politics.

As an active member of the Republican National Committee, he played a role in helping elect candidates such as Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush. At the local level, he also has helped Mayor Alex Penelas and Miami-Dade Commissioner Jimmy Morales, among others.

"He understands every client's needs," says Alan Kluger, a prominent Miami attorney.

GET TO KNOW

Name: Leoncio Ernesto de la Peña
Occupation: Attorney; founder and senior partner at De la Peña & Bajandas. Community and political activist. Board member of Voices for Children.

► **Personal:** Born in Holguin, Cuba, in 1959; he came to the United States in 1969.

► **Family:** He and wife Lourdes live in the South Miami area with their 18-month-old daughter, Sofia.

"Leo has an amazing sense of people, and he does exactly what a lawyer is supposed to do — listen and counsel the client. People trust him. He is an active member of the Roman-Catholic Church and a committed family man, above all."

Wife Lourdes echoes the thought.

"He gives to so many, but does it very low-key," she says.

The two first met in a Miami Beach restaurant in 1993. They married in 1997.

"Whether it is a priest or a client, or friend, he is always there to help and guide the person legally or emotionally," she says. "Seeing Sofia reach out to him when he comes home at night, is the happiest and most memorable experience of our marriage."

"I like to give quietly," de la Peña says. "You do it to help with sincerity, you don't have to be part of pro bono to make a difference."

So far, those who know him say de la Peña has made a difference.

"He has demonstrated his interest to eradicate the violence and neglect from the very beginning," Rodriguez says "not just in our community, but in our entire social system."

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