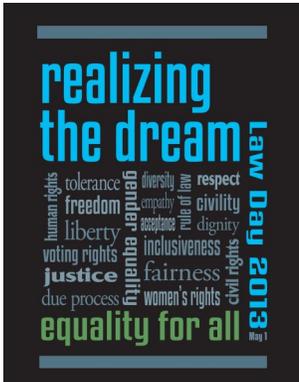


CSSD Chronicle

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Law Day 2013 *Realizing the Dream: Equality for All*



Law Day was first celebrated in September 1958 when President Dwight D. Eisenhower proclaimed “a day of national dedication to the principles of government under the law.” Since 1963, Law Day has occurred on May 1st and follows a designated theme. The American Bar Association (ABA) promotes local, state, regional, and national events in recognition of Law Day and honors those who exemplify its ideals. The theme for Law Day for 2013 was “Realizing the Dream: Equality for All” in recognition of the 150th anniversary of the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation.

According to the ABA website, the 2013 theme for Law Day highlights the promise of equality under the law which has made America a beacon to other nations. It is a pledge clearly set forth in the Declaration of Independence and in the opening words of the Preamble of the Constitution, “We the People.” It is, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, the proposition to which our nation is dedicated.

There were many events throughout Connecticut that supported the 2013 theme for Law Day, including a Judicial Branch presentation to New Britain youth.

The Law Comes to New Britain—On Saturday, April 27th, St. Mary’s Catholic Church in New Britain sponsored a day-long, faith-based retreat

for more than 50 local adolescents, 13- to 20-years-old. According to Miriam Ithiar, a family education specialist and community leader, who organized the event, the neighborhood surrounding St. Mary’s is made up of many families from Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. Ithiar, and other church volunteers, helped design the retreat to address the cultural issues faced by Hispanic youth within their families, at school, and in the community.



Miriam Ithiar from St. Mary’s Church speaks with the Honorable José Suarez

The Honorable José Suarez from Hartford Superior Court, and New Britain Juvenile Probation Officers Wilfredo Nunez and Marilyn Flores, were guest speakers at the retreat and spoke to the group about their roles in the judicial system. They also talked about their own Hispanic heritage, and

their individual journeys as young adults to overcome obstacles relating to language, culture, and peer pressure.

The Journey to Judgeship—Judge Suarez and his family moved to Connecticut from Puerto Rico when he was getting ready to enter sixth grade. The judge told a humorous story about his first day of school in the small town of Wilton. The teacher handed out an index card to each student and asked them to fill out their name, address, and other family information. The judge admitted to the audience, “I didn’t know a word of English,” but a helpful student allowed the judge to copy from his own card. Fortunately, it wasn’t long before the teacher realized she had two students with the same name and address, and the school began to provide the judge with the bi-lingual language support that he needed.

Judge Suarez also shared that he dropped out of college at one point because he was impatient with the length of time it was taking to earn a degree—he wanted to work and earn money for the material things he thought were more important. The judge’s mother was not happy with his decision, and refused to drive him to his job—he had to walk over three miles to get to work. According to the judge, “By not driving me, my mother was telling me that if I wanted to be on my own, I had to do it on my own. It wasn’t long before I went back to college.” The judge stressed the long-term importance of education, and encouraged the group to stick with it, no matter how long it takes.

Judge Suarez then gave the audience a brief overview of his judicial career, as a lawyer and Assistant Attorney General, before becoming a judge in 2009 during the administration of Governor M. Jodi Rell. The young adults in the audience were attentive, and eagerly asked questions: “What’s an Attorney General?”; “How many years do you have to study to become a lawyer?”; “What does a judge do?” They also peppered Judge Suarez with other questions about the legal system, which he gladly answered. He also explained the roles of a criminal, family, civil, and juvenile judge, as well as the difference between

juvenile court and adult court.

The overarching message that Judge Suarez gave his youthful listeners was to not create a criminal record for themselves. "It's always a big deal when you get in trouble, even as a juvenile," said the judge. "When you're an adult, bonds get higher and penalties get stiffer as your record gets longer." The judge ended his remarks by encouraging the teenagers to become lawyers. "It is the most fulfilling thing that I've ever done in my life," said the judge. "I've had tremendous satisfaction in working with families...it is such a great pleasure to see when a family, or an individual, gets it; rehabilitates from whatever their problems may have been, and becomes a productive member of society."



The Honorable José Suarez, JPO Wilfredo Nunez, and JPO Marilyn Flores

The King of "No"—New Britain Juvenile Probation Officer

Wilfredo Nunez is a high-energy guy, who clearly loves his job, by the way he walked back and forth in front of the group of teens, and gestured frequently with his hands to get his point across. Nunez told the group about growing up in a housing project in the North End of Hartford, and admitted there were "a lot of obstacles to overcome" in his youth. He gave much of the credit for his success to his older brother, Pete, who taught him a powerful word that, Nunez says, "everyone should know. It will help you through life. The word is 'no'." With a wry smile, Nunez added, "Growing up, I was the *King of 'No'*."



PO Wilfredo Nunez speaking to youth at St. Mary's Church, New Britain

Some of the teens laughed nervously, and nodded their heads in agreement, as Nunez described real life situations where the word "no" has the power to help them stay out of trouble—saying "no" to the guy who asks them to deliver a package of drugs; not getting in a car with a friend when you don't know the other passengers; saying "no" to the temptation of stealing a pair of sneakers just because you want them; and, saying "no" to the urge to hurt someone because you're angry. "Remove yourself from the situation," Nunez advised. "Store that word 'no' in your head and use it. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people you and I know who said 'yes'—and they're no longer with us today."

Latina Role Model—Marilyn Flores is also a JPO from New Britain, and she, too, grew up in a troubled Hartford neighborhood before her family moved to Wethersfield. She was one of six children, and the only one in her family to graduate from college. According to Flores, her parents did not have the chance at education, but "they wanted me to do something with my life, and give back to the community."

Flores was honest with the group about her teenage years. "I won't lie to you. I got into a lot of trouble," and she admitted how hard it was to resist peer pressure, and people who were a negative influence. Flores also talked about her struggles in school, and how she almost dropped out in her junior year of high school. Fortunately, she sought help from a school counselor, who believed in her, and the counselor arranged for her to take college classes at night while she finished up her high school studies. Flores graduated high school at the age of 16, attended community college for two years, and then received a full scholarship to Central Connecticut State University (CCSU). According to Flores, "My drive was to prove to the people who told me I couldn't make it, that I was going to make it." Upon graduation from CCSU, she worked as a DCF social worker, helping families find the community resources they needed to succeed.

Flores has been a juvenile probation officer for nine years. "My passion is working with people, and I love it," she said. Flores sees her job as helping court-involved kids discover what led them into trouble, and giving them the tools and opportunity to change. "I'm tough, but I'm fair. I can give you all the tools in the world, but you have to use them." Flores echoed several of the points made by Judge Suarez regarding graduated responses for subsequent criminal offenses, and how being in the wrong place, with the wrong people, can land a juvenile in adult court. She spoke of one 16-year-old male who was at the scene of a fatal stabbing, and even though the juvenile didn't commit the murder, his case was transferred to adult court—with adult consequences.

Flores now has her Masters degree, and her new goal is to eventually earn a law degree. "I want to be that role model—that Latina role model—to show that if you put your mind to it, you can make it. I want a Latino, or anyone who comes into my office, to see that even if you make a mistake, you can still become someone, and give back to the community."

For more information on Law Day, visit the [American Bar Association](http://www.americanbar.org) website.

The CSSD Chronicle is a regular publication of information and news about the Court Support Services Division. Questions or comments on this edition, or suggestions for future articles, can be directed to Linda.Grzeika@jud.ct.gov