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Carmen Ortiz: A Life of Advocating for Victims of Crime

Stephen E. Seckler

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Carmen Ortiz served as the United States Attorney for the District of Massachusetts from 2009 to 2017. During that time, she oversaw a number of high-profile cases including the prosecution of mobster Whitey Bulger who had been in hiding for almost two decades, and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, one of the Boston Marathon bombers. Carmen also had significant achievements in the healthcare fraud arena, leading the District of Massachusetts to some of the largest civil healthcare fraud settlements in U.S. history.

Carmen left the United States Attorney's office at the start of the Trump administration after serving over 30 years in the public sector. She was ready for the next chapter in her life and in 2017, she returned to private practice where she has been for the last four years. I sat down recently to ask Carmen to reflect on her career and talk about what motivated her to pursue a career in criminal justice.

A Native New Yorker Who Grew Up in Spanish Harlem

Carmen spent her early life in Spanish Harlem. As the daughter of Puerto Rican parents, she lived in a Latino neighborhood in Manhattan. It was a very homogenous community, and her household was fairly strict, especially for girls. It wasn't until her family moved to Long Island that she realized there was something different about her. In high school on Long Island, she was the only Latina in her class. Only then did she begin to meet people who did not speak Spanish.

She was a good student and didn't dwell too much on her differences. That was not what motivated her to become a lawyer. In fact, her real inspiration for law school was the television show Perry Mason, which she watched from a young age. She didn't know any lawyers growing up, but she always loved courtroom drama.

I asked Carmen what career messages she received from her parents. She said that her mother told her she could do whatever she set her mind to if she worked really hard. Her mother, who married early and never had the same educational opportunities, was a real mentor to Carmen. She wanted for Carmen what she didn't have herself.

Carmen said she didn't need a lot of pushing, though. "I have always been very ambitious, very driven. But I did need support. And my mom, and my dad to an extent, provided that for me. They never felt that I had any limitations in what I wanted to accomplish." Carmen also spoke of the mentoring and encouragement she received from her high school guidance counselor and from a professor in college. She is also grateful to Scott Harshbarger, who was the first District Attorney to hire her, and Sharon Hanson who was a terrific mentor to her in the DA's office.

Opportunities in Law School at George Washington University Sparked Carmen's Interest in Becoming a Prosecutor

Carmen became interested in becoming a prosecutor in the summer after her second year in law school when she worked for the Public Integrity Section of the Department of Justice. As a third-year law student at George Washington, where she prosecuted misdemeanors as an intern for the US Attorney's Office in Washington, D.C. Being in a courtroom, she got the trial bug.

She began her prosecutorial career with the Department of Justice Criminal Division in Washington, D.C getting hired through the Honors Program. After that, she relocated to Boston to join the man she met in law school who

became her first husband. In Massachusetts, Carmen served as Assistant District Attorney for Middlesex County.

An Advocate for Victims of Crime

As a young prosecutor, Carmen felt she could be a real advocate for victims of crime. But she also realized early on that she had the power as a prosecutor to dismiss a case if she saw any injustices in the making.

She found it very rewarding to advocate for victims. It gave her a great sense of accomplishment to help them navigate the criminal justice system, "which can be incredibly frightening and intimidating to individuals who have no experience with it." She enjoyed bringing some sense of justice, whether she was dealing with victims who had their purses snatched, were sexually assaulted, had their homes broken into, or family members who lost someone to violence. Helping them through the process, working as hard as she could to bring them justice, was the reward for her.

She shared with me a very moving story about two little girls who had been sexually assaulted by an elderly neighbor. After the conviction, their mother and dad came up to her and hugged her. The mother whispered in her ear, "Carmen, for the first time tonight, we're going to be able to sleep. We're going to be able to sleep." And she thought to herself, "This is why I do this work!" She could help families get through the process and get some degree of justice. It doesn't make people whole, but hopefully it brings them some degree of comfort.

After a brief stint in a small firm outside Boston, she joined the United States Attorney's Office. There, she was given the chance to work on cases involving financial crime, including ones in which people had been betrayed by persons they knew and trusted and ones in which people had lost their life savings or retirement funds. Shortly after Barack Obama became President, he appointed her to head the office.

As the United States Attorney, being there for victims and families that

suffered from the explosions at the Boston Marathon in 2013 was very rewarding. Getting to know the families and surviving victims of Whitey Bulger was as well.

First Woman and First Latino to be a US Attorney in Massachusetts

Carmen has a lot of pride about being the first woman and first Latino to be a United States Attorney in Massachusetts. Boston was not the most hospitable place for minorities in the 1980s. Carmen said that first time she had a jury trial in Massachusetts, the entire jury was white.

She told me, "It's great to be in a position where others can look at you and say, wow, she can do it. I can, too, in terms of being a woman, in terms of being a person of color, where the doors don't open that easily. I hope that in addition to motivating and inspiring people that I am also able to be an example. When I meet people and they learn that I'm Puerto Rican, my parents are from Puerto Rico, and I'm fluent in Spanish, and they learn more about me my culture, that gives them a whole different perspective of what a Puerto Rican is, rather than what they get from a TV show, or movie, or a newspaper article."

Life After 30 Years of Public Service

When Carmen left the US Attorney's Office, she was more than ready for her next chapter. Indeed, she has not slowed down yet. She considered an academic career and taught briefly at Boston College School of Law but decided to join the law firm Anderson & Kreiger.

Today, Carmen focuses her practice on internal investigations, corporate compliance, civil litigation, and white collar criminal defense. She also has significant experience with sexual harassment investigations and claims, and high-stakes employment litigation.

She sits on a number of nonprofit boards of directors including that of Crossroads, which focuses on empowering youth, the Board of Trustees and

a number of committees at Adelphi University, where she was an undergraduate, and the Governance Committee for the Beth Israel Lahey Health system. She also serves as a role model and mentor to younger lawyers of color.

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Authors

Stephen E. Seckler
President, Seckler Legal Recruiting and Coaching

Stephen E. Seckler, Esq. (stephen.seckler@counseltocounsel.com) is President of Seckler Legal Recruiting and Coaching. As "Counsel to Counsel", he has coached hundreds of attorneys through career transitions and helped hundreds of lawyers to grow their income. Counsel to Counsel is his website and podcast. His program, The Next Stage, is for senior attorneys thinking about "What Comes Next".