

Judicial Profile: Faith Guides Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Maria Sampedro-Iglesia



Maria I. Sampedro-Iglesia

Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Maria Sampedro-Iglesia is a study in contrasts.

A devout Catholic and firm upholder of the law, Sampedro-Iglesia nonetheless granted custody of a child to a gay mother despite a state law prohibiting such adoptions. In her order, the judge said unequivocally "there is no rational connection between sexual orientation and what is or is not in the best interest of a child."

She stands by her decision.

"That case turned around the way it turned around because the adoptive mom was honest," she said, "... and when the Department (of Children and Families) tells me they are opposing the adoption because of this law, I was like, 'What do you mean?'"

She said the real question was, and is, "at the end of the day is the child going to be better off?"

The case is an example of what she calls an incredibly rewarding and challenging job.

"It's very difficult being a parent and hearing some of the things children endure," she said. But when a family is reunited, or a child abused by his parents is adopted by a loving family, "there is nothing like it."

Sampedro-Iglesia came from Cuba aboard the Freedom Flights in 1969 and settled in Bergenfield, N.J. Hers was the only Hispanic family she knew in the area.

The family moved to Miami when she was 12. By then she knew she wanted to be a lawyer.

"I always wanted to try and find the truth," she said. "I always wanted to try and help people that needed help. I wanted to be a prosecutor because I wanted to bring justice to the world."

She wound up in criminal defense. An internship turned into her first full-time job.

"Having a very structured Catholic upbringing you have a hard time thinking you're going to defend a rapist, or a murderer or a child abuser," she said. "But when you think about it, or at least the way I think about it, we're defending his constitutional rights. It makes all the sense in the world because it protects everybody's rights. It sounds very idealistic, but I believed it then and I believe it now."

The job also was an eye-opener. Part of her responsibilities included going to the jail to talk to clients.

"It was a very difficult time for a woman. They would whistle at you. They would scream out their desires. It was very difficult to feel respected," she said. "I think I got disenchanted."

She went on her own for a couple of years, as a general practitioner handling family, criminal and civil work. Then she worked with a couple of different attorneys doing mostly insurance litigation and, finally, as an in-house counsel for AIB Financial Group before joining her husband at his firm.

Becoming a judge had been a thought for a while, and her brother and husband encouraged her. In 2008, she ran and ended up winning unopposed.

She was assigned to the juvenile dependency division when she took the bench and has been there ever since.

"It's a much more difficult job than I thought," she said, "and you work a lot harder than I thought."

Just over a year after taking the bench, on April 13, 2010, her husband learned he had Stage IV tonsil and tongue cancer. The only sign was a pimple on his neck that wouldn't go away.

"He had no symptoms when they told us. It was devastating."

They fought it with daily radiation treatments and the rosary.

He went from 205 pounds to 115. Radiation continued through that summer. Then, test results showed they had turned the corner. He remains in remission still.

The struggle became the subject of a book she wrote, "The Heroes Among Us." Proceeds from sales go to the University of Miami Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center. So far, she said, that's about \$14,000.

Sampedro-Iglesia took a month off to be with her husband. Since returning to the bench, she's become associate administrative judge of the juvenile division and works in both juvenile dependency and united family court. "The idea is one family, one judge," she said.

She's also an advocate of finding new and innovative ways of helping children, both in the legal system and out.

She helped launch "Bench Buddies," where judges and other court personnel read books to the kids in a neighboring elementary school. The judges dressed as elves for Christmas and as pilgrims for Thanksgiving. And now she's supporting an effort aimed at bringing in therapy dogs to help some of the kids who come into the dependency division.

Another ongoing project targets human trafficking. Defendants thought to be possible victims—such as chronic runaways, girls arrested for prostitution or others identified by DCF—are sent to her. The goal: to give them "safe harbor" and get them help to regain their independence.

That, too, has been an eye-opener.

"It can be any girl," she said. "It is amazing that they do not see themselves as victims."