



Judge Jorge Labarga

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It was a dark night in 1961 in Melena del Sur, a small Cuban town a few miles south of Havana. Suddenly, scores of Army vehicles surrounded the Labaraga home shining their lights on the home. Soldiers crashed through the front door. Mrs. Labarga tried to shield her two young sons while the soldiers ransacked the home looking for Jorge Labarga, Sr. Luckily, the Judge's father had left for Miami on a Pan Am flight two days earlier. Mr. Labarga's offense? He had kept the machinery running at one of the Fanjul sugar mills.

Mrs. Labarga and her two young sons remained in Cuba for the next two years, through the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Blockade. In 1963, unable to fly to the U.S. they left for Mexico City. They waited seven months for a visa, and a reunion in Miami with husband and father.

Mr. Labarga returned to work for the Fanjul's at the Osceola Mill. His son, Jorge, attended the fourth grade in a Pahokee elementary school. Jorge didn't speak a word of English, and it took his six months to learn the language. In 1969, the Labarga's moved the family to West Palm Beach. Jorge graduated from Forest Hill in 1972. After his high school graduation, he enrolled at the University of Florida, majoring in political science.

He next enrolled in law school in Gainesville, and graduated in 1979. The day Jorge graduated from law school, the Dean threw a party. By accident, Zulma came to the party with a friend. She had just graduated from undergraduate school. They talked for hours. The next day Jorge left for West Palm Beach, and Zulma for Miami. The romance didn't cool, but intensified. Jorge spent every weekend for a year traveling to Miami to be with Zulma. They were married a year later.

Having served as an investigator for a year, and law school intern in the Public Defender's Office, he was hired by Richard Joranby. First in the appellate division, then in the felony division. Two years were in Marvin Mounts Court, whom he described as his "courtroom teacher." In 1992, he switched over to David Bludworth's office, and worked in every division in the State Attorney's Office. Over a seven-year period, he tried over 150 jury trials.

1987 was the year of the celebrated John Trent-Fruend murder trials. Jorge was the prosecutor, and David Roth and Doug Duncan represented the two Defendants. It was during this association that David and Doug convinced Jorge to come with them at Cone, Wagner. With much misgiving, he left the State Attorney's Office and joined them. He worked on a product liability team with Ward Wagner and Mike Erickson; they tried cases all over the state. In 1992, he was made an equity partner. This was also the year that he, David Roth, and Doug Duncan left to form their own law firm. At this time, he was doing 70% personal injury work and some criminal defense.

Having spent years in the Public Defender's Office and State Attorney's Office, and working closely with Judges every day, he felt qualified to be a Judge. He said that this was not an easy decision because he had a wife and two children. He would have to take a substantial cut in pay

to become a Judge. He was selected by the Judicial Nominating Panel for Judge Gross' vacancy in the Circuit Court. I will not take time to recount this particular selection process. The Palm Beach Post has discussed this at length. Suffice it to say that Jorge received a drawing telephone call from Governor Chiles stating: "how would you like to be a Judge?"

Judge Labarga has been assigned to the Family Division. This is a very hard division because there are no juries to make decisions, the issues are emotionally charged, many times there are small children involved, and usually inadequate assets. Notwithstanding this, Jorge is very happy with being a Judge, and stated "I cannot believe they pay me to this."

When the Judge is not on the bench, he stated that he has become a dedicated family man. Puttering around the yard, taking his two daughters, Stephanie (9) and Caroline (7) to ball games. Zulma keeps busy as a homemaker, mother, and substitute elementary school teacher. In Jorge's application to become a Judge, he lists more than 40 separate civic organizations, bar associations, community committees (an officer in many), he belongs to and works for, speaking events, lectures, nominating commissions, various Hispanic committees and commissions, and a weekly newspaper column. The list is extensive; three pages in the application. This is a person with wide experience outside the Law. Governor Chiles should be complemented on his selection of Jorge as a Circuit Judge.