



Honorable Nancy Perez

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Nancy Perez has been selected by the Governor as our newest County Court Judge. She is the first person of Spanish extraction to sit on our bench in Palm Beach County. To understand Judge Perez, we have to go to her roots. To do this, we have to digress for a minute into what is called the "migrant train." According to the latest report (1974) from the Area Planning Board, the following findings were made. Palm Beach County is the greatest user of migrant labor in Florida, employing approximately 19 percent of the peak season migrant workers in the state. The number of adult migrant workers during peak season is estimated at just over 18,000; in addition, there are another 7,900 resident agricultural workers and their families approximate 53,600. Of the total, 57 percent are Spanish-American and 41 percent are African-American. It has been evident for some time that the Spanish-speaking segment is increasing every year. These agricultural workers are generally housed in labor camps, farm labor housing, public housing projects, and rooming houses. The average migrant worker has a large family with an average of 2.5 children, with a family income average of \$3,864.00. It was found that adult educational limits were very low, averaging between six and seven years of schooling. Nine out of ten adult migrants had not graduated from high school and one half of the Spanish-speaking migrants spoke English poorly or not at all.

When one considers that Judge Perez came from this type of background, one simply has to marvel. Nancy Perez is proud to relate that her immigrant father from Puerto Rico was a migrant farm worker all his life. And so was her mother. Judge Perez was born near Buffalo, New York, in 1953, where her mother was picking strawberries and cherries. The Judge was one of eleven children. This was a family that actually worked on the "migrant train." We find the Judge picking tomatoes in New Jersey at the age of eleven, when we were in Cub Scouts and Brownies.

Then her father made a wise decision. He moved his family to a farm in the Fort Myers area and said to his children: "you are not going on the migrant train anymore; you are going to school and you will study." Although he continued to follow the migrant train from state to state and sent money home, he didn't pull his children out of school to pick crops as some did. The result of this unselfish devotion of the father and an ever-present mother produced remarkable results. Most of all the children in the family graduated from high school. Four have graduated or will graduate from college. And what was the motivation behind the parents' decision to instill this sense of education and accomplishment in their children? Simply stated by the father, it was: "Education will be your way to leave the fields."

Therefore, when Governor Chiles selected Nancy Perez over a list of other well-qualified candidates, he did two things. One, he appointed the first Hispanic judge in this county; and secondly, he recognized the "American Dream," that persons or families can come to America and, by willpower and determination, they and their families can succeed in our society. The

Governor must have realized the significance of this appointment, because he came from down for her swearing in ceremony. This surprised most everyone, including the Judge.

With this background, honor society, Who's Who, and third in her high school class, she had money offers of college scholarships. Choosing Edison Community College in Fort Myers for two years, she was named the outstanding Social Science Student. Then, it was to Florida State for a B.S. in business and accounting in 1975.

After graduation, she came to a fork in her life. Would it be "numbers" or "social issues"? She chose social issues and decided to go to law school. When asked why she decided to become a lawyer, she stated for many reasons, including her father who had suffered certain illegal injustices. At this point, she admits that her father had a big emotional impact on her. Three years in law school produced a J.D. She had been president of the Spanish American Law Student Association.

Feeling a sense of responsibility toward the system that enabled her to leave the migrant train, she took an understandable turn in her life. For the next four years, she worked for the Migrant Farmworkers Division of the Georgia Legal Services and then with the Association of Migrant Associations in Tallahassee. We are all aware that various federal, state and county governments, along with many private organizations, give assistance to migrant farm workers. This would include housing, legal services, health care, education, scholarships and day care centers. The Judge became a supervisory part of this governmental and private organization help for the migrants.

At this point probably feeling that her debt was at least partially paid, in 1983 she took and passed The Florida Bar exam. She became an assistant public defender in West Palm Beach. She started defending misdemeanors at Gun Club under the tutelage of Fast Eddy. She worked up the ladder from misdemeanors and defended felony cases for five years. On the way, she fell in love with a coworker, Assistant Public Defender Paul Scala. From this Italian/Spanish union, they now have a daughter Laura.

Every story has a conclusion, and it might be this. Consider this father constantly moving from field to field, state to state, picking vegetables from the ground and fruit from the trees, sending money home to educate his children. Isn't it really the American Dream? The Judge's father is dead now, but there surely must be some special place in heaven to honor a father who makes such a sacrifice for his family and instills such values in his daughter.