

PIONEERING PROFESSOR

Amid upward climb, educator keeps an eye on where she came from

By MELISSA RUBALCABA RISKE



Photo by Ron McKinney

She's been called a pioneer; after all she's one of four Latina law school deans in the nation. Yet Jennifer Rosato Perea says she is more comfortable relating her story of hard work and telling students how at one time, she was just like them.

The child of working class parents, Rosato Perea was a first-generation college student with a dream of making the world better. She still can recall how nervous she felt as she set off to an Ivy League college and later law school. She didn't have a lawyer in the family that served as a mentor; rather she was charting a new course.

Today she is the dean and a law professor at Northern Illinois University College of Law.

"Students tend to put the dean high upon a pedestal, so I find it helpful to point out the similarities we share and convey that I was once exactly in their shoes," Rosato Perea said.

Law school wasn't the goal when Rosato Perea entered Cornell University. Initially she wanted to be a teacher or social worker. She was drawn to working with children who had been abused and neglected. Yet it was while working with children that she began to realize one way she could affect more change would be in the field of law.

"I thought I could make more of a difference if I were a lawyer rather than a social worker," she said.

She still had a desire to teach. Rosato Perea found a way to bring together her desires for advocacy, interest in the law and love of teaching and became a law school professor.

"It was a great fit. It combined all my passions and skills," she said.

Her strengths and skills continued to shine as she ascended the education ladder. This fall she begins her sixth year as dean at Northern

Illinois University College of Law.

"In retrospect it all makes sense," she said. "I have been training for the last 20 years to be exactly where I am now. Along the journey, I've learned a few things, and grown in ways that have brought me to where I am today-the dean of a public law school."

Christine Saba, special assistant to the dean at Northern Illinois University College of Law, said Rosato Perea is completely energized by the many roles she fills at the school. She is a mentor, counselor, leader, collaborative partner and the face of the law school.

"As she tends to the growth and development of NIU Law, it is obvious that she draws on her unique background and experiences," Saba wrote in her nomination of Rosato Perea as a Woman of Distinction.

In her years at the school Rosato Perea has seen the school through growth and development and there is still more to accomplish. Fundraising, building new collaborations and enhancing the school's reputation are among her top goals.

Assistant Dean David Gaebler said Rosato Perea has motivated faculty to work together to build more experiential learning opportunities where students can have hands-on training in the field of law.

"She unified the faculty," he said. "She has an incredible level of energy. It's infectious."

Rosato Perea also makes a point to spend time in the classroom, teaching courses and working with new law school professors as well.

"I try not to forget where I came from and the reason I do what I do for the students," she said.

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