

Puerto Rico native discovers her career niche in the law

By Brian Cox



In one way or another, attorney Melody Block seems to have lived much of her life jockeying between two worlds.

She describes the experience as “a continuous discovery of the tension and excitement that comes from having one foot in two places at once.”

Born in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, Block came to the United States at the age of two after her parents divorced. It wasn't long after she began school that she realized her life was different from her peers in many ways, not least of those being socio-economic status.

“In terms of identity, I think I've always struggled with not feeling American enough but also not Hispanic enough,” says Block. “I was raised by a proud Puerto Rican family but have also had to assimilate into a different culture and reality.”

Her mother came to the United States as a child and grew up in Dover, N.J. The family was part of a larger migration from a small town in northwestern Puerto Rico called Aguada that settled in Dover over a span of decades following World War II. By the 1980s, nearly half of Dover's Hispanic residents were immigrants from Aguada or their descendants. Block's mother returned to Puerto Rico when she was married. The couple had four daughters before the marriage ended.



During her years abroad in South and Central America, Block took the opportunity to visit Machu Picchu in Peru.

When Block's mother came back to Dover with her children, she worked cleaning homes for a contractor who built mansions in Morris County. Block remembers accompanying her mother to the newly built homes to prepare them for the buyers to move in.

“It was a significant experience for me,” she says. “Despite living humbly, I was exposed to a lot of wealth, and I was introduced to successful and ambitious people. It was a unique window into another world.”

Block, who is 13 years younger than her next oldest sister, inherited a role of responsibility at an early age as the only member of her family who spoke English as a first language. She is also the first among her family to pursue higher education, and she is certainly the first lawyer. She knows that life in mainland United States presented her with far more opportunities than her sisters had, but she says her sisters were tremendous supporters of her education and advancement.

They worked to give her access to resources they did not have – everything from advocating for her to attend private schools, to facilitating her attendance at leadership conferences in other states and Europe, to driving her to visit colleges.

“It took a village to raise me,” she says. “All of my mom's family participated too. My grandmother contributed, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins too. I had five different people picking me up from school on any given week.”

It wasn't always easy having so many eyes and ears tuned to her, but looking back on it now, Block realizes “how special it is that so many people had a hand in my success.”

The attention and accompanying expectations did create within Block the sense that she always needed to have her act together.

“I always felt a responsibility to make my family proud, to make them feel like the sacrifices and investment of time and money had been worth it,” says Block.

As a way of appreciating and reciprocating that support, Block has often helped her family members navigate United States systems and services – everything from voting, to interpreting at doctor appointments, or attending parent-teacher conferences. She also played an important role in the lives of her nieces and nephew, who see her as a role model and mentor. Despite

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Melody Block explores a cave in Ouro Preto, Brazil in 2007. She spent a year in Brazil as part of a study abroad program where she learned Portuguese.

juggling many responsibilities in several spheres of her life, Block does not view these complexities as a burden.

“It’s all a positive thing for me,” she says. “It was equally a challenge and a source of pride.”

After high school, Block attended Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. Again, she found herself straddling worlds and having to adapt and integrate.

“Once I was in college, I was starkly reminded what a different background I had in contrast with my peers,” she says. “It was a different universe. I was in classes and living on campus with people who had generations of family who had attended the College.”

Uncertain of a career path, Block majored in Hispanic Studies and International Studies with a focus on Latin America. This allowed her to explore her Hispanic identity, and she became more fluent in Spanish, concentrating on becoming a better writer and communicator.

At Trinity, she developed an interest in community advocacy and had internships with various nonprofits.

“The advocate in me was always there,” she says. “I just hadn’t decided how it would apply to my career.”

She took an opportunity to study abroad and spent a year in Chile and Brazil, where she also learned Portuguese. After graduation, she received a Fulbright Fellowship to work as an English teaching assistant in a remote area of northwest Colombia called the La Guajira, which is a peninsula that borders Venezuela and juts into the Caribbean.

The experience would have a tremendous impact on her life, ultimately leading to her decision to study law.

The Fellowship was sponsored by a coal mining company that was seen by the rural community where Block was stationed as a powerful, wealthy entity. However, there were also many points

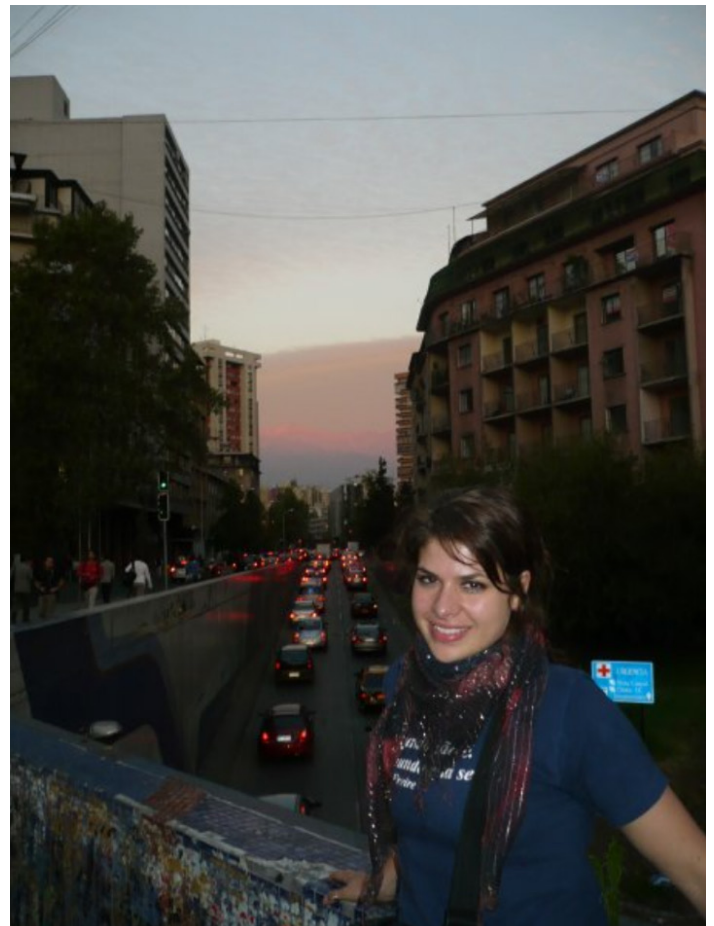
of contention in connection with the mine, such as allegations that indigenous lands were being exploited or that royalties paid by the company to the government were not properly funneled to improve the region’s infrastructure.

“That’s when I experienced the divide between the community and this very powerful presence there,” says Block, who started to think more about the importance of corporate social responsibility initiatives and compliance.

“It almost felt like they wanted me to help them with these things, but of course I couldn’t,” says Block. “I felt so disempowered by that.”

That is when she first entertained the thought of going to law school.

“I wanted to do something that gave me concrete tools to help people,” Block says. “As a lawyer, you do have tools. I later learned that making a company comply with the law is not that simple, but as an attorney you can educate your client on how they should comply or you can advocate for them in other ways such as through oral argument or legal writing. That really attracted me to being a lawyer.”



Block enjoys a view of the sunset in Santiago, Chile, where she worked for a year as an English teacher.

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Block chose to stay a second year in Colombia after she was recruited to implement a bilingualism program in the state that provided elementary school teachers training, tools, and curriculum to teach English to their students. She sometimes traveled by motorcycle, taxi, or “collective cars” to classrooms that were an hour or more away. She became accustomed to living in a town where you purchased groceries in an outdoor market, and the streets flooded when it rained due to an inadequate sewage system.

When the year was up, Block still was not ready to return to the states. She was even considering staying abroad for good when she accepted a position to teach English in Santiago, Chile, with a small business run by ex-pats from the United Kingdom.

She enjoyed the work and the people, but because she was not a Chilean citizen, life had certain challenges, and after a year she realized it was time to return to New Jersey where her family had come to see her as an “adventurer.”

Block spent the next two years working in a furniture store owned by her uncle in Dover as she prepared her law school applications.

She enrolled at Rutgers Law School in 2013 with an ultimate intent to practice in the area of corporate governance and social responsibility.

Her first summer of law school, she worked for a law firm that represented school boards. When she explained her ambition to an attorney at the firm, she told her it was exactly what the firm did every day, ensuring school boards and leaders were compliant with the law. It was a new perspective for Block.

“I started to see that I didn’t necessarily have to work in corporate governance or social responsibility. I could advocate for people no matter what I was doing,” she says. “That was a really useful perspective to get early on because it’s helped me find satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment despite the challenges that accompany a legal career.”

While in law school, Block was selected to serve on the Editorial Board of the Rutgers Law Record and published a note in the law journal. She also interned with the Honorable Esther Salas, a federal district court judge in the District of New Jersey and served as a student attorney at the Rutgers Education and Health Law Clinic where she advocated for the rights of children with disabilities.

After earning her juris doctorate, Block clerked in the Superior Court of New Jersey, Appellate Division, and then went on to represent clients in high-net worth matrimonial litigation. Then in 2019, Block joined her current law firm, Mandelbaum Barrett PC, which she described as life changing.

“I was able to take part in the fabric of the firm in a way I had always wanted,” she says.

She became involved with Primerus™ and now serves as one of the firm’s contacts with the network. She joined Mandelbaum’s diversity committee and helped in the recruitment of diverse attorneys.

She started as a commercial litigator, but during the pandemic she shifted increasingly into the corporate department where she felt she found her niche.

“I often get to work in teams. I still get to advocate for people. I think I do it more now than I did before,” she says. “I help people navigate a transaction, and buy or sell a business, which is often a life-altering decision and change for them.”

Block focuses her practice on commercial transactions including mergers and acquisitions and corporate governance, frequently for professional practices, start-ups, and closely held businesses. Block is also excited to expand the firm’s corporate law practice group to provide legal services to behavioral health providers and practices across the country.

“I consider my work to be very meaningful because I try to maintain an attitude of service” she says. As she reflects on the journey that brought her to this most recent stage of her life, she also finds joy in accompanying her clients through their own journeys to obtaining their goals.



Attorney Melody Block (at right) has found her niche in Mandelbaum’s Corporate Department where she feels she is a valued member of the team. Other members of the Corporate Department include (l-r) Casey L. Gocel, Philip Mackson, William S. Barrett, Peter H. Tanella, Dennis J. Alessi, and Barry M. Schwartz.