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# THE LAW ACCORDING TO MONICA NAVARRO: From immigrant to law firm partner, Lake Orion woman says hard work is the key

October 10, 2007

**BY CASSANDRA SPRATLING**  
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Two months shy of her 18th birthday, Monica Navarro left her home in Colombia, South America, to come to the United States.

"I didn't have any firm plans, but intuitively I knew I needed to see what else there was out there," Navarro says about leaving her hometown of Barranquilla. "I came from a place where none of the girls I knew went beyond high school."

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She went to Miami because she had friends there.

Initially, her goal was merely to learn English.

She enjoyed learning, so she kept going. First to a community college and later to Florida International University, where she received a bachelor's degree in political science and international relations. Most of the time, she worked various jobs during the day and went to school at night.

While at FIU, a required class -- constitutional law -- intrigued her.

She saw that the laws were the glue holding together basic rights and principles in the United States -- a place where hard work and effort -- not social class -- could determine your station in life.

Navarro's life has become proof of the very principle that excited her in her first introduction to law.

She came to the United States in 1984 on a travel visa, barely able to speak English, and in 1990 became the first person from her undergraduate university to be admitted to the University of Michigan Law School. She graduated with honors in 1993, earned a prestigious federal clerkship, and worked at a few firms in Michigan and New York before joining her current firm in 1998. Six years later, she became the first woman and first Hispanic person to become a partner at what is now Frank, Haron, Weiner and Navarro.

## No is not an option

Navarro, 40, attributes her success to tenacity, passion for the law, and pride in and responsibility to her ethnic heritage.

"I worked very hard and I didn't let up," she says at her office at the Troy law firm. "I'm very passionate about representing my clients' interests.

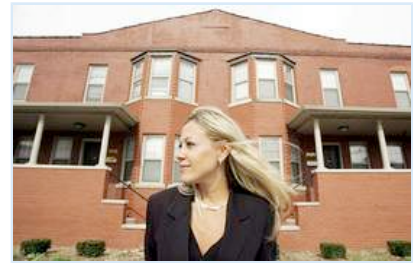
"And I never pretended to be someone I'm not," she says. "I'm proud to be a Latina. I wear my ethnicity on my sleeve. When some people were taking their clients to play golf, I was taking my clients to salsa clubs."

"When some kid of my same background sees me, I want him or her to see me and know if you work hard, and

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## PHOTOS

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(ERIC SEALS/DPP)

"I'm proud to be a Latina," Monica Navarro, 40, says. "I wear my ethnicity on my sleeve. When some people were taking their clients to play golf, I was taking my clients to salsa clubs." Navarro came to the United States when she was 17, barely able to speak English.



## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

### Getting to know Monica Navarro

**Age:** 40.

**Occupation:** attorney with Frank, Haron, Weiner, and Navarro of Troy; specializes in health care and fraud and abuse litigation.

**Family:** Mark Crane, an attorney in Rochester; three children: Spencer, 11; Natalie, 9, and Lauren, 7.

**Hometown:** Lake Orion.

**Accolades:** 2007 Michigan Super Lawyer selected by Law & Politics Magazine, 2006 Crain's Detroit Business 40 Under 40.

**Associations:** Southwest Solutions Board of Directors; Oakland County Bar Association, Hispanic Bar Association of Michigan, American Health Lawyers Association.

**Hobbies:** Creative writing; drawing in charcoal; Latin dancing, and reading.

**What's the last book you read just for pleasure?** "I just finished two. 'The Witch of Portobello,' by the Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho and 'Living to Tell the Tale,' by the Nobel Laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez."

stick to it you, you can be successful. Never take no for an answer."

Not that it has been easy. "You'll fall flat many times, but you get up, clean up the scrapes and keep going."

She says difficulty with the English language was her greatest challenge.

Taking notes in class when English is not your native language requires the extra step of translating the language then writing notes. "I would write my papers in Spanish, then write them in English," she says.

She became an avid reader to improve her English. "I read a ton until English became more natural," she says.

Navarro also began minimizing her accent. She tape recorded her voice as she read newspapers aloud.

"I was aware of the bias and prejudice in society about people with accents," she says. "No matter how well you comprehend the language, there are people who equate an accent with ignorance or incompetence.

"I didn't want my accent to distract from my message," she says.

Navarro specializes in health care litigation and fraud and abuse, mostly representing physicians and other health care providers in disputes.

"She's as good as any attorney I've ever met and I've been practicing for more than 40 years," says David Haron, one of her partners. "She's an incredibly quick study, a quick learner -- I think because she's so disciplined. She digs in and she self-teaches herself in any area. Health care was an area she didn't have any background in, and she has literally become a recognized expert. And, personally she has a magnetic personality that attracts people."

**For the love of family**

Navarro made Michigan her home after marrying Michigan native Mark Crane, an attorney in Rochester, whom she met when both were in law school. They have three children, ages 11, 9 and 7.

Her stamina for hard work came in handy again when she was building a law practice while raising small children.

"As a Hispanic woman I was raised to value having the mother in the home, so I put a tremendous burden on myself to be all things to all people," she says. "It took a lot of tweaking to find the right balance."

For a short period, that even meant having her infant son and a babysitter at work with her when she gained a coveted position as law clerk for U.S. Judge Julian A. Cook Jr. of the Eastern District of Michigan She needed the child there so she could breastfeed.

Cook said she was an outstanding clerk and said having the child in the office never interfered with her work.

"It doesn't surprise me that she would go on and do well, and I've enjoyed watching her career. She had all the tools and the mental toughness necessary to become a great attorney," Cook says. "An essential tool is the ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing. She did that skillfully and carefully. If I wanted to have a career law clerk, as some judges do, I would love to have had her."

These days, Navarro usually gets up by 5 a.m. to work out for an hour before getting herself and her family up and out. She and her husband rotate the duties of getting their children off to school and getting home at a reasonable hour. If one can't be there, the other one is.

Sometimes, that means working after the children have been fed and put to bed.

"Thank goodness for home offices with computers and the Internet," she says.

**For the love of others**

Recently, she added volunteering at Southwest Solutions to her duties, and three months ago was appointed to the board of the nonprofit agency that provides a variety of services to improve the lives of the predominantly Hispanic community in southwest Detroit.

Southwest Solutions president John Van Camp introduced himself to her at a celebration for people Crain publications designated 40 Under 40 -- people recognized for their accomplishments.

"I introduced myself because based on what she said I thought she'd be interested in what we do," Van Camp says. "I didn't realize what that would mean. She has taken the mission and the vision and in a very short time, owned it and infused it with her business and personal relationships."

As an example, she connected the agency with the University of Detroit Mercy, which now plans to offer legal and health care services at the center. She has introduced other people to the agency to improve the literacy program, especially important to her because she knows the importance of learning English.

Navarro says she is driven to excel because she loves everything she's involved with and she believes it's important not only for herself, but for others, that she do well.

"In part, I like being a lawyer because it gives me the visibility to do the things that are important to me," she says. "Yes, I like my paycheck, my clothes and my shoes. I like all of that. But that doesn't feed the soul. It's much larger than me. I want people to know I'm Latina because I want to help break the stereotypes and I want to inspire people coming behind me to see the possibilities and believe in the possibilities. When they see someone who looks like them and talks like them, who came from the same place as they, they can believe."

Contact **CASSANDRA SPRATLING** at 313-223-4580 or [spratling@freepress.com](mailto:spratling@freepress.com).

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**Drives:** 2006 black BMW -- "My first nice car after driving a mini-van for 10 years."

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**Advice:** "Only look forward. Embrace the possibilities; worry about the obstacles when you hit them. You will hit walls, study them for a moment, then climb them. You can't accept defeat. And you have to do it for more than just yourself."

**Contact CASSANDRA SPRATLING** at 313-223-4580 or [spratling@freepress.com](mailto:spratling@freepress.com).

**Celebrating Hispanic women in the Detroit area**

The United States celebrates National Hispanic Heritage Month from Sept. 15 to Oct. 15.

That time was chosen to coincide with the anniversary of independence of seven Latin American countries: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico and Chile.

During Hispanic Heritage Month, the Free Press will profile four women who are part of the growing population of Hispanics in metro Detroit.

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**nix**

This is a prime example of how immigrants can come to this country and make a positive difference (we hear so much negativity these days about immigrants...but this is a prime example of how there shouldn't ever be a blanket statement about these things). Monica Navarro came to the US without speaking English—but she persevered, and made it through law school and at least one bar exam...something NOT to be taken lightly. Plus, she is a wife, a mother, a community leader...I do not know her, but I know many like her. Unfortunately, I also know many who are not like her but also happen to be US citizens from birth....she is to be commended, as are so many like her.

*Posted: Thu Oct 11, 2007 1:20 pm*

**dolby**

What an inspiring story. I love reading stories like this one that demonstrate what a positive attitude, hard work and a "never-say-die" attitude can do even when someone faces difficult circumstances.

I agree the American dream is available to those who will use their God-given talents and apply themselves. This woman from Colombia who hardly spoke a word of English when she first came here did more with her opportunities in just a few years than many Americans do in a lifetime.

It's good to count you as a fellow American and fellow Michigander, Monica. Congratulations on your accomplishments, and best to you and your family. Hope the Michigan winters aren't too rough on you!

*Posted: Wed Oct 10, 2007 4:37 pm*

**I Am Write**

There is a great message here for all those who think they are being held down due to their color or background.

It is, get off your duff and work, no one is going to hand it to you, speak clearly, pull your pants up over the crack of your a\$\$ and develop some ambition. The American dream is alive and well, but it is not a gift, you must work for it.

*Posted: Wed Oct 10, 2007 6:59 am*

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