

SAO ALUMNI PROFILE – JOSE ARROJO

We begin the year by featuring a former Chief Assistant State Attorney who left an indelible mark on our office through his close work with the State Attorney on policy and legal issues. He was a trusted advisor to her while mentoring younger ASAs and being a sounding board for more experienced prosecutors. His professionalism and dedication to the law is only surpassed by his fairness and humanity. We are proud to feature Jose Arrojo in this month's SAO Alumni profile.

Jose is the child of hard-working parents and part of a close-knit family that has always emphasized helping others. So, it is no surprise that Jose dedicated his life to public service. His late father was from Galicia, Spain, and emigrated to Cuba where he met Jose's mother. They had their first son whom they sent to the United States through Operation Pedro Pan in 1961. A year later, they reunited with him in Miami and a year after that, Jose was born in their new land.

The family soon moved to Chicago where they welcomed a third son. They lived in the Windy City until Jose was in the 6th grade. They eventually returned to Miami but not before he cultivated a passion for the Cubs and for education. The Arrojo household was always filled with the aromas of the motherlands (Spain and Cuba), stories of times gone by, and a passion for making a difference in the lives of others.

“As a child I wanted to be a teacher because I had many wonderful experiences with my own teachers,” says Jose. “Academically, I loved history, government, and literature.”

As he earned his undergraduate degree at the University of Miami in Education with a concentration in Social Studies, Jose determined that he wanted to be a classroom teacher.

But when he graduated, there was a surplus of teachers, so he decided to go to law school. He took the LSAT without studying and

ended up going to Florida State University College of Law. There he developed an interest in constitutional and criminal law.

“I interned at the SAO in the summer of 1987 after my first year of law school,” he says. “And during my third year, I interned at the United States Attorney’s Office in Tallahassee.”

After deciding to practice criminal law, Jose applied to a few firms including the Department of Justice and the SAO. He was offered a position as an Assistant State Attorney by then State Attorney Janet Reno and began at the office in March of 1988.

“We had a small class, but it was great. We had many superstars that have become respected attorneys, judges, and even District Attorneys in other jurisdictions.”

By the fall of 1989, Jose was Assistant Chief of County Court. His path in the office led him to the Felony, Sex Battery, and Narcotics Units.

“When I was in Narcotics, I had one of the most interesting cases I have ever worked on. There were five codefendants and one of them was a former Boston police officer. They had a shipping container with a fake panel where they were hiding 60 kilos of cocaine from Colombia. It was real life Miami Vice.”

As a trial prosecutor, he handled several cases that made a significant impression upon him. One of those cases involved a sexual battery. “The defendant, Cameron Bacchus, is still in prison. He was the closest thing to a real life-long predatory pedophile I had ever encountered. He was sexually abusing his stepdaughter and his biological daughter. He had previous run-ins with the law, and this was his third interaction with the system. It was the first important case that I tried by myself.”

Jose then became a Division Chief in Felonies before leaving to be In-House Counsel for the Police Benevolent Association (PBA) for four years. Though he enjoyed this new endeavor, he missed being in the courtroom. So, when State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle offered him a position, he returned to his prosecutorial roots in the

Special Prosecutions Unit that encompasses Organized Crime, Public Corruption and Voter Fraud.

“I was then promoted to be the Division Chief of the Narcotics Unit which at that time, included the early version of today’s Gang Unit.”

Once again, an external opportunity presented itself and Jose went into private practice for three years. He did a lot of civil rights defense, labor and employment, represented police unions and also joined the Public Defender wheel.

Then he received a call that former Chief Assistant of Special Prosecutions Mary Cagle would be leaving the SAO and her position was open.

“I spoke at length with the State Attorney about the direction of Special Prosecutions and what my role would be there,” said Jose. “I was happy to come back again in March of 2004 and be responsible for the Special Prosecutions Units (Gangs, Public Corruption, Organized Crime, Narcotics, Economic Crimes and Mortgage and Insurance Fraud) and half of the Felony Division Units.”

Jose also worked alongside State Attorney Fernandez Rundle on important criminal justice issues at a national level. “I am thankful that State Attorney Fernandez Rundle allowed me the privilege to represent the State of Florida, to be an advocate for victims, and to be involved through her office, locally, at the state level and nationally, on the great criminal justice issues of our times, including: bail reform, prisoner reentry, diversion, investigation of police use of deadly force, and recruitment of young lawyers of color and women to the criminal prosecution bar.”

“Jose’s wide-ranging perspectives and experiences, augmented by his discerning legal mind, not only made him a superb Chief Assistant State Attorney, but allowed him to be the teacher so many young lawyers needed without ever seeming scholastic. These qualities make it is easy to see why I, and so many others, hold Jose in such high regard,” said State Attorney Fernandez Rundle.

Even though Jose was not trying cases himself at that time, he would often be seen in the courtrooms sitting in on trials of prosecutors under his supervision. He was always a great support, advisor, and teacher.

In September 2018, Jose said farewell to the SAO once again when he was appointed Executive Director of the Miami-Dade County Commission on Ethics and Public Trust. The Commission is charged with interpreting and enforcing County and municipal ethics ordinances that govern the conduct of all County and city elected officials, employees, and board members. One of Jose's principal duties is to provide ethics guidance and opinions to all covered persons. "What is unique is that now people call you for guidance before they act."

And though he is a respected attorney, Jose is a teacher at heart and has been educating lawyers, police officers and public officials for years. He lectures extensively on local government ethics, and as an expert in the investigation, prosecution, and defense of alleged misconduct by law enforcement officers, he also lectures on criminal justice matters related to public official misconduct. He has held adjunct instructor positions with Barry University, the University of Miami, and Miami-Dade College.

Jose remains a passionate defender of justice, fairness and doing what is right. Of all the positions he has held over the years, being an Assistant State Attorney has been the one closest to his heart.

"It is an often-repeated comment by former prosecutors, but it still remains ever so true, that working as an Assistant State Attorney in that office is a foundational professional experience that lasts a lifetime and without a doubt, one of the best jobs that any lawyer will ever have, anywhere in the country."