AN INCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Equity in Justice

with Judge Jannette Mondragón



The mission of the State Bar of New Mexico's Equity in Justice Program is to cultivate and grow a legal profession in New Mexico that is representative of and reflective of the people of New Mexico. As part of that mission, we bring you the series "Inclusive Interviews." We call these *inclusive* interviews both as a play on words and as a contrast to the term "Exclusive Interview."

Because legal employers with inclusive hiring and employment practices have a bigger talent pool from which to hire and access to a larger client base, these interviews serve to amplify that growing and cultivating inclusivity and belonging in our profession is beneficial to all legal employers; be they private firms, government entities or nonprofits.

This *Inclusive Interview* is with Judge Jannette Mondragón. Judge Mondragón has been practicing law since 2018 and is currently a Doña Ana County Magistrate Court.

Q: What is your background?

A: Before law school, I worked as a caseworker for Child Protective Services and later as an HIV Specialist with Planned Parenthood in El Paso. After graduating, I joined the 13th Judicial District Attorney's Office

I later transitioned to a nonprofit focused on immigration detention work, where I helped secure the release of approximately 42 individuals with serious medical conditions.

I then served as a case enforcement attorney with the Child Support Services Division, working to ensure New Mexico children received the financial support they were entitled to.

Today, I serve as a magistrate court judge in Doña Ana County. I've heard thousands of cases—magistrate court is truly the people's court, handling roughly 90% of the public's first contact with the judiciary. I preside over jury trials, bench trials, and preliminary hearings in felony cases, along with landlord-tenant matters, general civil disputes involving $10,000 or less, traffic cases, code-enforcement violations, and lower-level misdemeanors.

Q: What made you want to become a judge?

A: I always knew I wanted to work in the legal system—as a lawyer and eventually as a judge. A personal experience ultimately set that path in motion. I was hit by a vehicle as a pedestrian, and when I testified in court, I felt ignored until I mentioned that I was an attorney. That moment stayed with me. No one should be treated that way, and no one should need a title to be heard or respected.

I wanted to create a courtroom where every person—regardless of background—is treated with dignity, heard fully, and guided fairly through the process. I draw on my lived experiences as an enrolled member of the Chickasaw Nation, a first-generation Mexican-American woman, a mother, a former caseworker, and someone who grew up in difficult circumstances. Those experiences help me foster a courtroom environment that is inclusive, respectful, and grounded in fairness.

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Q: What has been your greatest accomplishment in your legal career or of what in your legal career are you the most proud?

A: I am incredibly proud to be the first Native American judge to serve in the Third Judicial District. Native American attorneys make up less than 1% of the Bar, so bringing that representation and perspective to the bench is meaningful to me and to the communities I serve.

I am also proud of creating space for Indigenous culture within the judiciary. At my second swearing-in, members of the Pueblo of Tortugas offered a blessing, and my sister sang an honor song—traditions rarely seen in judicial spaces. Bringing cultural visibility and honoring those traditions in the courtroom is something that means a great deal to me.

Q: Who is one of your heroes in the legal profession?

A: Barbara Romo is one of my greatest role models. She is a veteran, was a caregiver to a disabled veteran, and a leader who exemplified compassion and balance. She made it clear that family responsibilities would never jeopardize our jobs, and she taught that justice isn't always prosecution—sometimes justice is mercy.

When I raised concerns about inappropriate law-enforcement behavior toward Native Americans in a DWI case, she listened, validated my concerns, and turned it into a teaching moment for the entire office. She modeled accountability, professionalism, integrity, and what true justice looks like in practice.

Q: What advice do you have for new lawyers from diverse backgrounds?

A: First, stay grounded in your community. Those are the people who will support you through difficult moments—whether you need to vent, seek advice, or navigate challenging situations.

Early in my career, a defense attorney grabbed me by the hips and moved me aside in the courtroom. I was stunned and didn't know how to respond. Talking it through with attorneys from my community helped me decide how to address it appropriately. Community support is essential—make sure you have it.

Second, stay open to opportunities. Don't box yourself in. Be flexible, take risks, and don't fear failure or being told "no." Growth often comes from trying again.

Finally, make space for others. Stick your elbows out and create room at the table for more diverse voices.

Q: What can the legal profession in New Mexico do to be more inclusive?

A: New Mexico is more intentional and welcoming than many jurisdictions, and I believe we do a strong job overall. That said, there is always room for improvement.

One major challenge is language access. We do not have enough interpreters statewide, which leads to delays, longer case timelines, and barriers to meaningful participation for non-English speakers.

We must also continue addressing hidden barriers in our system and work toward courts that are equitable, accessible, and ensure full and meaningful participation for everyone.

Q: If you could have one superpower, what would it be and why?

A: Teleportation. Flying would be nice, but teleportation would let me instantly be where I need to be. If my kid has a cross-country meet, I could finish work, take care of things at home, and appear there right on time—no rushing, no traffic, no stress.

Of course, the deeper answer would be the ability to create a perfect legal system—one that delivers true justice for all.

Interested in being the subject of an Inclusive Interview?

Contact SBNM Equity in Justice Attorney Abby Lewis at abby.lewis@sbnm.org.

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