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Learning firsthand how to fight bigotry and discrimination

On April 26, I had the privilege of receiving the Anti-Defamation League's Women of Achievement Award. It was a wonderful honor to be recognized alongside three amazing women — Christine Castellano, Mary Jo Herseith and Janet Lee — who are all tremendously accomplished and terrific role models to many.

During the course of the evening, each of us shared with our guests our personal stories, what inspires us and how we have become the people we are today.

As joyful and celebratory as that evening was, I cannot help but to be horrified and saddened by the incessant acts of hatred and bigotry that continue to pervade our world, particularly on the heels of the terrorist attacks in Manchester and on London Bridge.

These are just a few of many such incidents in the recent past which are happening everywhere, both abroad and in our backyard. My thoughts and prayers are with each of the victims and their families.

I have been asked by a number of people to share my Anti-Defamation League acceptance speech. An excerpt is included here.

I dedicate it to all victims of violence, hatred and bigotry and sincerely hope that we as a society can continue to work together to create a world that is more tolerant and which embraces our differences, rather than seeking to destroy them.

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The ADL Women of Achievement award is so meaningful because of the incredibly important work that the Anti-Defamation League does. Now more than ever, the ADL's mission is a critical one — to safeguard civil rights; to combat hatred and bigotry of all kinds; and to foster an open and respectful dialogue of tolerance, acceptance and respect.

I have been asked to tell you my story and how I became the person I am today. This is a story

about my family — my father, Lou, my brothers Mark, Karl and Paul and my mother, Beatriz, whom we lost to diabetes in 1987.

My mother was a Mexican immigrant and my father is a first-generation Italian. Mark, Karl, Paul and I grew up on the North Shore during the 1970s. We did not have a lot of money back then, so we did not live in a fancy house, drive expensive cars or wear the latest fashions. But we lived in a house full of love and we were all very close. Our parents provided us with everything we needed, including a second-to-none education.

Nevertheless, we were different compared to other families in town, both socially and economically.

My mother was a brilliant and well-educated woman. Born and raised in Mexico, she started her college education at the age of 14 in Mexico City and earned three science degrees during her tenure.

She had great aspirations for becoming a doctor and emigrated to the United States in the hope that this dream would become reality. She also came to this country to provide opportunities for her children that she knew her homeland could not.

She barely spoke English upon her arrival, which she learned by reading Harlequin romances and

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watching television. Her vocabulary was impeccable, yet she was difficult to understand because she spoke with a thick Mexican accent. She was strikingly beautiful with jet black hair, dark eyes and a deep olive complexion. Notwithstanding her brilliance and great beauty, she stuck out — and not in a good way.

My mother was bullied, ridiculed and treated badly at various times over the years. I heard

PARADIGM SHIFT



**CHRISTINA
L. MARTINI**

Christina L. Martini is a practicing attorney, author and columnist. She is chair of the Chicago intellectual property practice group and national hiring partner for associate recruiting at DLA Piper and has been in private practice since 1994. She focuses her practice on domestic and international trademark, copyright, domain name, Internet, advertising and unfair competition law. She frequently speaks and writes regarding the legal and business landscapes and appears monthly in Chicago Lawyer magazine as a columnist of "Inside Out." You can reach her at christinamartini.paradigmshift@gmail.com.

the stories and witnessed much of it firsthand. Because my brothers and I also looked and sounded different from other people we knew growing up, we were likewise bullied as children.

This continued through our high school years and once we all went to college we were able to find our way. Because of the wonderful parenting and amazing education we had, the four of us went on to successful and fulfilling

and my life experience, education, heritage and background are seen as a unique combination and an advantage rather than a hindrance.

In fact, many people have no idea I am Latina because of how I look and my surname, and I have received an interesting array of reactions from people when they learn about my heritage.

Since my time as a young professional, making a difference in the community has been incredibly important to me, particularly in areas such as diversity, for all of the obvious reasons. As my mother's only daughter, I feel compelled to experience and achieve what she could not during her short 50 years of life, and to make good use of all of the gifts that have been shared with me and have enabled me to become who I am today.

I also feel a strong obligation to pay it forward to the future generations of men and women who have great talent and who like me need someone to believe in them and to help them on their way.

As a society, it may feel like we have come a long way — from the 1930s and 1940s when my parents were born, to the 1950s when my mother emigrated from Mexico, to the 1970s and 1980s when I was growing up, to today. We believe that today we have a much higher tolerance for each other's differences and a greater awareness of all things diversity.

But we must guard ourselves against a false sense of complacency and a mistaken belief that discrimination does not still run rampant in our midst.

This is why the ADL's work is so very important — because we are constantly reminded that even today, discrimination is everywhere — at the local grocery store, in our schools, in our social circles and in our business communities. It is our responsibility to remain forever vigilant, to combat discrimination when we see it and to help create a better path for each and every one of us to grow and flourish.

Thank you again so much for this wonderful honor.