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Finding inspiration to empower in 2014

With the end of 2013, another new year is upon us. It is a time for fresh beginnings and for planning our personal and professional priorities for the year ahead.

While we embark on the next 12 months, we should take time to reflect on our recent successes and challenges and look for ways to make 2014 the best year yet.

In our quest for self-improvement, we all look for inspiration in myriad ways. There is often profound wisdom in the personal accounts of others, particularly those who have accomplished great feats, notwithstanding tremendous personal struggle and tragedy.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor's recent autobiography, "My Beloved World," tells one such story. Her memoir is a candid, intimate account of her upbringing in a Bronx housing project as the daughter of Puerto Rican immigrants. There are many intriguing aspects to Sotomayor's experiences. She has shown remarkable courage and fortitude in not only surviving, but thriving under circumstances that would have destroyed many others.

Being a Latina woman of modest means trying to make it in the male-dominated legal profession is only a small part of her story. At a young age, she experienced a number of tragic events which had a significant impact on her life as well as on how she views the world and her place in it.

Sotomayor was diagnosed with Type I diabetes at age 7, at a time when many considered the disease to be a death sentence. By necessity, she became self-sufficient at an early age and

learned how to give herself insulin injections. Her mother worked nights as a nurse to support the family and was often not at home. Her father was an alcoholic, which prevented him from being able to keep his hands steady enough to administer her injections. At age 9, Sotomayor's 42-year-old father succumbed to his addiction.

His passing devastated her family and left an indelible imprint on her. Notwithstanding these traumas, when she tells her life story, it is not as one who feels severely disadvantaged but, rather, as someone who believes she has lived a truly blessed life.

She is a survivor, and notwithstanding all of the ill fortune and challenges she has endured, she has persevered and thrived through sheer force of will. She is passionate about the life she lives and her moral compass is focused on serving others. She is an inspiration to us all.

I was deeply moved by Sotomayor's story in many ways, and there are a number of interesting parallels in our respective lives. I am the daughter of a Mexican immigrant who came to the United States in the 1950s

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PARADIGM SHIFT



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with little more than the shirt on her back to follow the American dream.

My mother barely spoke English and left her entire family behind in Mexico City in search of a better life. While she went on to have a family whom she deeply loved and four children of whom she was extremely proud, she never realized her own professional dreams. Diabetes prematurely ended her life at the age of 50. I was a senior in high school at the time.

Sotomayor writes that experiencing the death of a parent as a child makes you see the world very differently; I agree. Our ability to handle life's challenges are forever measured against the pain of that devastating loss and we feel at least some level of assurance going forward that we can weather practically any storm which may befall us.

There is also the stark realization that everyone among us will experience ill fortune of some kind during our lifetimes and that it is up to us whether we will allow those experiences to lift us up or to beat us down. If we are willing, we can glean valuable lessons from these events. In doing so, we can all develop a more profound sense of empathy and deepen our understanding of each other.

These are all important lessons for us, both as lawyers and as human beings. We are all a product of our experiences and we have an obligation to keep learning and growing and to continuously share our knowledge for the betterment of others. As we make sense of both the good and bad that happens around us, it is important to keep a balanced perspective and to focus on our primary mission as attorneys, which is and always will be to serve others, notwithstanding the ebbs and flows of our own lives.

Sotomayor observes that law is not a career, but a vocation, and possessing intellectual talent is a gift which serves a higher purpose and should be shared, particularly with those who are less fortunate.

As we consider what is in store for 2014 and contemplate our goals and commitments for the upcoming year, remember that our profession empowers us to make a meaningful difference for those whom we represent, and to even save their lives. As Sotomayor so aptly states, there are no bystanders in life and our humanity makes all of us a part of something that is bigger and greater than ourselves. It is in putting others first that we can find the greatest fulfillment and inspiration of all.