

By Clifford Gately

Meet Incoming CBA President **Aurora Abella-Austriaco**

Success Through Perseverance, Integrity, and Service



Photos by Bill Richert



Addressing CBA Annual Meeting Attendees regarding her priorities for the bar year

WHEN YOU MEET INCOMING CBA PRESIDENT Aurora Abella-Austriaco, the first impression is of an intelligent, articulate and sincere woman who cares very deeply about people, the community and the legal profession. When you see her resume, you learn she is a trailblazer who is widely recognized as a consummate lawyer and leader. As you get to know her, a fuller picture emerges of a loyal friend and colleague, as well as a devoted wife and mother.

In the corner office of her law firm on Adams Street, overlooking Chicago and Lake Michigan, surrounded by pictures of her husband, Dr. Jerome Austriaco, and two daughters, Danielle (16) and Isabelle (13) and numerous legal and political luminaries, Austriaco exudes a unique presence.

“Genuine’ is a good way to describe her,” said U.S. District Court Chief Judge James Holderman, who appointed Austriaco to chair the district court’s 2012 Magistrate Merit Selection Panel Committee. In sentiments echoed by many, Judge Holderman continued, “She is a warm, gracious, outgoing individual who draws people to her just by her professional presence.”

Austriaco is well-established in the Chicago legal community with the reputation for having an incredible work ethic, impeccable integrity and stellar leadership qualities.

She is a self-made woman, and how she reached the highest level of CBA leadership is a study in doing things the right way and for the right reasons. To truly understand how Austriaco came to embody such a strong set of values, it is important to understand her background.

Early Years in the Philippines

Born third from the youngest into a family of eight in Quezon City, Philippines, Austriaco was raised in the Philippines until age 18. When Austriaco was eight years old, her mother, a nurse, and her father, a pharmaceutical salesman, decided that they could best provide for their family by coming to the United States. At that time there was a need for nurses, and her mother quickly found

work in a hospital in Chicago. But because of immigration rules, the family could only bring over one child every year.

“That was a huge sacrifice for my parents,” Austriaco said, “but you do what you have to for your family.”

Primarily raised by her grandmother, aunts and older siblings, Austriaco walked the three miles to elementary school at an early age. “We’d leave at 6 or 6:30 a.m. to get to school by 7:30 in 90 degree weather,” Austriaco said.

Her parents have always served as Austriaco’s role models because of their work ethic and the sacrifices they made.

“They would say to us, ‘Regardless of how bad things are, there are better things out there. You must always persevere. There are no shortcuts in life, but do your best and it will all work out.’”

Growing up under the regime of President Ferdinand Marcos and under martial law, Austriaco also learned not to take liberty for granted. “You could not be out on the street after 10 pm. If you got caught, who knows where you would end up.”

When it came time for Austriaco and her two other siblings to come to the U.S., she was enjoying her sophomore year in college and wanted to stay in the Philippines. Her mother, “in her infinite wisdom” told them they could stay in the Philippines, “but you are on your own.”

And so on August 21st, 1983, a day she will never forget, Austriaco set out to join her family in Chicago. On their way to the airport, news came across the car radio that Marcos’ chief rival opposition, leader Benigno Aquino, Jr., was assassinated at the Manila International Airport (now called the Ninoy Aquino International Airport in his memory). Austriaco and her sisters didn’t think they were going to allow any flights out at all.

“We were the only plane to get out that day,” said Austriaco.

In the U.S.—Starting Over

Austriaco’s parents always did everything in their power to provide their children with the best education.

“My mom used to say, ‘As women, you have to make sure you



Former CBA President Anita M. Alvarez congratulates Aurora at the CBA Annual Meeting

always have a great education. You'll never know what is going to happen and you need to make sure you are able to fend for yourself and your family. So get a good education. That's the only way."

Her education in the Philippines was a solid foundation, however because she attended a Catholic University, and not a state university, she could not receive credit at DePaul University for her first two years of college. When she arrived in Chicago, Austriaco started out auditing classes at DePaul to get acclimated to the U.S. school system, and she then entered the university as a freshman instead of a junior.

She also needed a job. Her first work experience in the U.S. was applying for a job at a Woolworth retail store on State Street. She walked into the store, had an interview, got hired that instant and immediately went to work as a cashier.

"I had no idea what I was doing since I never got any formal training," said Austriaco. "It was the holidays and it took me forever just to ring up one customer. They pulled me out because I was not doing well. So I asked the guy who hired me 'Is this how you train people?' and he said 'yes,' and I said 'I'm so sorry but I don't think this is going to work out.'"

After the demise of her two-hour retail career, Austriaco went to the DePaul Placement Office and followed up on an Attor-

neys' Title Guaranty Fund job posting. She was hired into an entry level clerical position. She worked at ATG throughout college and law school at DePaul. This was also how she got to know ATG president and CEO Peter J. Birnbaum, who she describes as one of her mentors and dearest friends.

Austriaco credits Birnbaum for introducing her to people in the Chicago legal and business communities, and for teaching her the importance of "giving 200% of whatever you do, and no matter what you are doing, to always look for a better way of doing it." Austriaco says that Birnbaum introduced her to, and guided her in, the title insurance industry and the real estate industry. He brought her into important meetings and gave her stretch projects that challenged her, knowing that she was capable.

To this day, Birnbaum, who has known Austriaco as long as anyone in the U.S. outside of her family, said that he still turns to her when he needs to get things done. "If I'm looking to accomplish something and I need help, my instincts are to call Aurora, particularly in the area of public interest work or law," Birnbaum said, and then quickly qualified, "Although I do try to be judicious about over-extending her."

During law school Austriaco worked full time during the day and attended school at night. A pattern of hard work and dedication that foreshadowed her current lifestyle.

When she graduated from law school, ATG offered her a permanent position, but she wanted to be a trial lawyer.

"*L.A. Law* was one of the big things on TV at that time," Austriaco said, "and I thought, I want to be one of those lawyers."

Birnbaum introduced Austriaco to a friend of his named Harold Levine who had a father-and-son real estate litigation law practice, and who was looking for an associate. Austriaco had found her next employer and mentor.

"Harold Levine was like a second dad to me," Austriaco said. "He took me under his wing and taught me about litigation, ethics, work ethic and how to be civil to everyone and also represent your client."

On Mentors and Mentoring

There is no question that Austriaco has friends in high places. What is telling is the way that she has made connections without a hint of pretense or guile.

Austriaco tells a story about being a young lawyer and going to a luncheon where Laurel Bellows was on the speakers' panel. Impressed by Bellows, Austriaco came directly up to her after the program introduced herself and asked her out to lunch. During that lunch, Austriaco said "I'd like you to be my mentor." Bellows, seemingly caught-off-guard, thought for a moment and said, "I will agree to that, if you will do one thing—you, in turn, must agree to mentor someone else."

"And she has," Bellows now says.

Bellows credits her mentor, the late Esther Rothstein, an iconic role model for women lawyers, and the first woman president of the CBA, as the person who first made Bellows promise to "pay it forward" in return for Rothstein's support. And in such a way, the circle remains unbroken, a chain of mentoring that continues from generation to generation.

One of Austriaco's friends and colleagues, Ray J. Koenig III, said he considers Austriaco a mentor (although he never officially asked her to be his mentor).

"I don't consider her a mentor in my practice area, because we do different things," Koenig said, "but more in the area of how to be a responsible lawyer—'responsible' meaning a good lawyer, yes,

but also responsible to your communities and your profession.”

Koenig cited the quotation, “to whom much is given, much is expected.”

“That is how she lives and that has been an inspiration to me. She is always helping and giving.”

Former Cook County State’s Attorney Dick Devine, who appointed Austriaco to the Cook County State’s Attorney Asian Advisory Council agrees. “There is a lot of substance to her,” Devine said. He went on to describe a particular situation when he was in office and certain attorneys were trying to discredit him and mount a negative campaign against him. Austriaco called Devine to get his side of the story.

“Aurora then started emailing and calling other attorneys to get my side out about it,” Devine said. “It was really gratifying that not only was a friend willing to listen to my side, but to also stand with me and work with me, with absolutely no motive or personal gain. It just lets you know that if the going gets tough, she’ll still be there. She is a good friend, a loyal friend and a stand-up friend, and I am forever grateful to her.”

“Growing Up” at the CBA

Harold Levine encouraged Austriaco to become involved in bar associations, and specifically the CBA. At the time, Austriaco was just getting started as an attorney and she asked Levine, “Harold, you want me to do all these billable hours *and* get involved in the CBA? I said, ‘something’s got to give.’”

He looked at me and said “You have to be involved in the bar association because you have to give back to the legal community.” So Austriaco got involved in the YLS Real Estate Law Committee, “which I ended up loving.”

“I met so many great people through that committee. I was pulled into community projects, public service projects, and I got involved in YLS leadership, eventually becoming the Chair of the Young Lawyers Section. From there, I ended up growing up at The Chicago Bar Association and it became my second home.”

Austriaco says she loves the CBA because of the camaraderie, the people, the skill development and cutting-edge programs that the CBA offers. It also formed the base

for one of her networks.

“I’ve gotten so many calls from lawyers who I knew from the Young Lawyers Section years because of our relationship and trust,” Austriaco said. “For example, they know that I respect the fact that it is their client and the client will always return to them after I’ve helped them out. To me, reputation and ethical obligations are paramount.”

“Aurora’s rise in the bar association world was very organic and not calculated,” said Sandra S. Yamate, Chief Executive Officer of The Institute for Inclusion in the Legal Profession. “It was the result of involvement, participation and leadership. She did not pursue it for attention, she did it for all the right reasons and that is part of why people respond to her so positively. She never gets involved with the thought of ‘what can this do for me.’”

Although Austriaco did rise through the ranks of the CBA though a mixture of her enthusiastic efforts, intelligence, values and good nature, she says that “never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I’d be president.”

A Drive for Meaningful Inclusion

The advancement of diversity has been a cornerstone of Austriaco’s career from the beginning, and will continue to be so during her CBA presidency. To look at some of Austriaco’s involvement in diverse organizations, gives an idea of the level of her conviction.

- Nine-term Chair of Cook County State’s Attorney’s Asian Advisory Council
- Past President of the Asian American Institute
- Founding board member of the Filipino American Bar Association
- Served on board of the Women’s Bar Association of Illinois
- Served on board of the Asian American Bar Association
- Past member of the Filipino American Voters League
- Served as Treasurer of the League of Women Voters of Chicago
- 2012 Diversity Director for the ABA General Practice Division

Austriaco has received numerous awards recognizing her work to advance diversity in



Aurora greets Judge William J. Bauer

the community and profession, including the 2006 CBA Alliance for Women’s Alta Mae Hulett Award, CBA’s Vanguard Award and ABA’s CLEO Award. As a commissioner of the Cook County Human Rights Commission, Austriaco works to protect people who live and work in the county from discrimination and sexual harassment in employment, public accommodations, housing, familial status, and credit transactions.

Not only is Austriaco the first Asian-American woman president of the CBA, she was the first female and minority president of the Illinois Real Estate Lawyers Association and the first woman minority to be elected to the board of the Attorneys’ Title Guaranty Fund.

“Aurora is a real trailblazer for the Asian-American community,” said Sandra S. Yamate, Chief Executive Officer of The Institute for Inclusion in the Legal Profession. “Aurora became actively involved in leadership in the CBA Young Lawyers Section at a time when not many Asian-American women were, and the fact that she had such a positive experience created an attitude of trust and comfort with the CBA with many Asian-American lawyers.”

An active speaker on the status of diversity in the legal profession, on the day of our interview, Austriaco was preparing to participate on a panel discussion on the topic of “Women and Minorities: Willing Partners or Reluctant Allies?” When asked where the profession currently stands in terms of diversity, Austriaco responds with her signature candor.



Aurora with her mother, Pat Abella



Aurora with daughter Isabelle and husband Dr. Jerome Austriaco



Aurora's daughters Isabelle and Danielle

"Aurora is one of those very special people who has always thought about others alongside herself. She has a tremendous ability to judge people and bring out the best in them. She is clearly a groundbreaker and she is not afraid to take on difficult causes. She is a woman of boundless energy and determination and a superior leader. I anxiously await her taking the helm at the CBA, and I am ready to follow her."

Laurel G. Bellows, Principal, The Bellows Law Group

"Aurora is very results-oriented and during her term as CBA president you are going to see her accomplish a great deal."

Peter J. Birnbaum, President and Chief Executive Officer, Attorneys' Title Guaranty Fund, Inc.

"There was a lot of groundwork that was laid before us, there is a lot of work that is being done right now, but there is still a lot of work to be done," she said.

"She has no bitterness, anger or ax to grind," Yamate said. "At the same time, Aurora does not discount the experiences of people who came before her. It's a very fine line, and one she walks beautifully. It is very impressive."

Wife, Mother and Professional

"I sometimes have no idea how she does it," said Koenig, "because she manages to run a healthy practice, be a good lawyer, maintain the respect of judges and attorneys, and still be incredibly involved in a variety of different organizations in a meaningful way. She does all that, and also manages to be an amazing parent and spouse. I don't know how she does it and I'm not sure when she sleeps." This coming from someone who manages a fairly full and hectic life himself. "She makes me tired just thinking about it."

When asked about work/life balance, Austriaco is honest and direct, "There is no such thing" she said. "But if you love what you do, you can come close, with some help along the way."

Bellows agrees, and says the "balance" word is something that she goes out of her way not to use. "I think it's a misrepresentation to young women who think they can achieve some sort of balance." Instead, Bellows uses the term "managed chaos."

"I think it's a matter of prioritizing on a daily basis," Bellows said. "Like me, Aurora has taken a successful risk in starting her own firm, and that's not an easy thing. Aurora has been very fortunate to have a tremendously supportive husband, family and friends."

"Aurora is certainly a model of someone who has achieved that success both personally and professionally," said Paula Holderman, Chief Attorney Development Officer at Winston & Strawn and President-Elect of the ISBA. "I don't think any of us can overlook the fact that she is a very smart, articulate, hardworking, competent, focused and ambitious woman. And, she has achieved a lot without creating any enemies. People are truly behind her and want her to succeed. She has a lovely family as well. She's just a great success story."

Austriaco's practice is focused on commercial and real estate litigation, construction litigation, mechanic's liens, defense of mortgage foreclosure, mortgage fraud-plaintiff's side, title insurance claims litigation and other special chancery remedy cases. Her clients range from individuals, to mom & pop shops to international corporations.

"Because of the current economy, I am doing a lot of defense of mortgage foreclosures," Austriaco says. "It's not just individual homeowners, but you have commercial property owners with 20 properties who are trying to figure out what to do."

She speaks passionately when she talks about her elderly clients like Louis and Perry Sip. A bank error related to payment of their real estate taxes resulted in the bank doubling their mortgage payments. When Austriaco discovered what happened, she let the bank know in no uncertain terms that her clients would not be in foreclosure but for the bank's mistake. She is currently working to resolve the matter, and the smart money is on Austriaco's side.

In 2008, Austriaco ran for state representative because as a Commissioner for the Park Ridge Planning and Zoning Commission she felt that there were issues in the community that were not being addressed.

"When she ran for state representative, she really got herself out in the community," said Paula Holderman, "and she gained confidence and contextual knowledge about what's going on with people. Just that experience alone has helped her mature as a lawyer and a leader. But she's had those qualities about her the whole time. At fundraisers she worked the room in a personal, authentic way. When she spoke, she spoke with a warmth and genuineness that made you really want her to win so that she could provide that same warmth and enthusiasm to her constituents. One of Aurora's defining characteristics is her ability to make other people feel good."

In her first political foray, and against an incumbent of 16 years, Austriaco lost by only three percentage points. During her campaign, she was at the train station by 6:00 am, back to her office making calls by 11 a.m. and "pounding the pavement," walking the district until sunset.



Aurora greets Herb Steinmetz and Justice Thomas L. Kilbride at the Annual Meeting

"I first met Aurora Austriaco in our year-long fellowship with Leadership Greater Chicago and I have called her a friend ever since. As lawyers with busy careers and as working mothers, Aurora and I have so many things in common. I have always admired and related to her as each of us have worked hard to create a good work/life balance. She is an accomplished and dedicated lawyer who continues to make significant contributions to The Chicago Bar Association and our community at large. Undoubtedly, she will leave a wonderful mark on the CBA and I applaud her as she takes on her new leadership role."

—Anita Alvarez, Cook County State's Attorney

"I have no doubt that Aurora will be an outstanding president of The Chicago Bar Association. She is a tremendous leader and a consummate professional. Over the past two years as I have served on the Board of Managers, I've had the opportunity to observe her as president-elect. She has really done a spectacular job, along with current president Bob Clifford, of moving The Chicago Bar Association forward."

—Chief Judge James F. Holderman, United States District Court, Northern District of Illinois

"The fact that Aurora will be an outstanding president is going to do the CBA proud and the Asian-American community proud."

**—Dick Devine, Partner, Meckler Bulger Tilson Marick & Pearson LLP,
Former Cook County State's Attorney**

"Whoever says they love it must be crazy," Austriaco said.

Right Person, Right Place, Right Time

So the portrait that emerges of the next CBA president is of a woman who learned the value of hard work, education and perseverance at an early age. She came to the United States and dreamed of becoming a lawyer. She blazed a path by epitomizing all of the right things that the CBA stands for: career, professional networking, public service, professional development and furthering the ideals of the profession. She is going to help the CBA promote diversity

and remain relevant by offering cutting-edge international CLE programs and by having a renewed focus on the small and solo practitioners. She is a community advocate and activist who stands for inclusion on all levels, and by her sheer effort, she will push others up the ladder. ■

Clifford Gately has 14 years of business development and marketing/communications experience in top-tier professional service organizations, including major international law firms and consultancies. A longstanding member of the CBA Record Editorial Board, Gately can be reached at cliffordg27@sbcglobal.net