

CBA President Jesse Ruiz:

One Good Thing Leads to Another

By Clifford Gately



Recently inducted CBA President Jesse Ruiz is a lawyer who comes from a strong family, church, Latino, education, and business background. He believes the keys to achieving success are hard work and the common bonds that bring people together. Speaking with him in his office deep in the big blue State of Illinois building, where he currently presides as the state's Deputy Governor for Education, Ruiz has a relaxed, gracious and modest manner that belies his legal, business and political savvy. As CBA President, he wants to make the association more relevant and inclusive than ever, and he is the right person at the right time to make this happen.

Chicago Beginnings

Ruiz, the youngest of four, was raised in the Roseland neighborhood, where he attended St. Anthony's grammar school (Father Mark of St. Anthony's gave the invocation at Ruiz's swearing in as CBA President). Ruiz's father came to the United States from Mexico in 1943 as a migrant farm worker as part of the bracero program (a Farm Labor Agreement that the U.S. entered into with Mexico during World War II).

As a farm worker, Ruiz's father followed harvests around the West and Midwest. He came to Chicago via Milwaukee, where, because he had an emergency appendectomy, a Wisconsin farmer threatened to ship him back to Mexico if he didn't immediately go back to the fields. "The migrant farmworkers were basically treated like chattel at the time," Ruiz recounted, "and the farmer said 'you're worthless to me now.'"

After his surgery, Ruiz's father snuck out of the hospital, eventually showing up at the doorstep of an aunt in Chicago, whose address he had on a postcard.

"He then worked as an undocumented immigrant from 1947 to 1955," said Ruiz. "He picked corn in Mendota, he worked on the railroad, the steel mills, and in construction. He worked on the construction of the old Sun-Times building [where the Trump Tower now stands] and the Prudential Building."

In 1955, Ruiz's dad returned to Guanajuato, Mexico, to apply for a green card, which is when he met Ruiz's mom. They married after he got his green card, moved to Chicago, and started their family, first in the Englewood neighborhood. When they moved to Roseland, much of their family life centered around St. Anthony's church (Ruiz's mother and two of his sisters still live in the parish). Ruiz attended Marist High School in the Mount Greenwood neighborhood, some distance away.

"A lot of the guys from the parish went to Marist, so I usually had a ride," said Ruiz. But when he had extracurricular activities, such as wrestling practice, he had to take three CTA buses to get home.

First Business, Then Law School

Ruiz graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1988, where he majored in Economics. After college, he took a sales position with the Inland Steel Company and then Ryerson Steel, whose plant was located in the old Pullman Railcar factory. Ruiz lived at home and commuted to work from his parent's house.

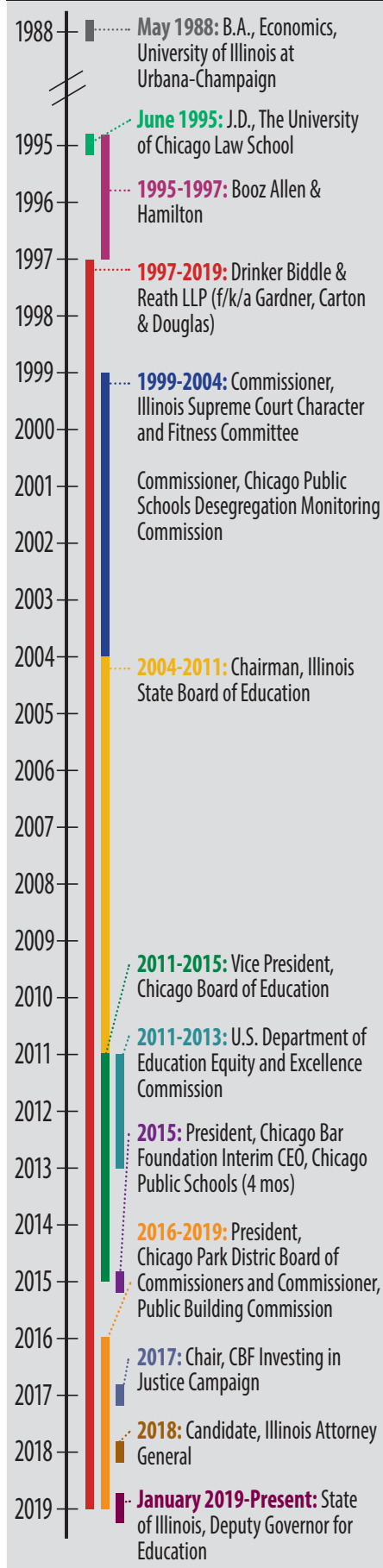
In college, he had been interested in both business and law, and he realized that as a transactional lawyer he could do both. In 1992, Ruiz entered law school at the University of Chicago.

While there, Ruiz made a number of what would be important connections. First and foremost, is that he met Michele, his wife. He also made other connections at law school: When looking for a summer job, a law school professor, Doug Baird, referred him to a young professor who would be teaching a course at the law school—future President Barak Obama. Being a new professor, Obama was in the process of recruiting students for his class, a class which Ruiz took in the Spring of 1994.

In 1995, Ruiz graduated from law school and was sworn in to the Bar.

"I remember the day I was sworn in. I was so grateful," he said. "My dad was from the fields of Mexico and he had a 3rd grade education. He spent his life toiling in manual labor so his kids could have a

JESSE H. RUIZ PROFESSIONAL TIMELINE





CBA Executive Committee members (left to right) Ray J. Koenig III, Maryam Ahmad, Jesse H. Ruiz, E. Lynn Grayson and Timothy S. Tomasik.

chance at an education.”

“To honor them,” Ruiz continued, “I have always felt I needed to take advantage of the opportunities that my mother and father worked so hard to give me.”

Like father, like son—Ruiz also teaches his sons to “work hard and apply yourself, and, with a little luck, you’ll get great opportunities in life.”

Things Start to Snowball

Right after Ruiz took the Bar exam he had the chance to give Obama some valuable advice. Obama’s first book had just come out. Ruiz bought a copy and decided to stop by Obama’s law office. That’s when Obama first told Ruiz that he was going to run for office.

Ruiz said, “That’s a dumb idea!”

He said, “You have a brilliant career ahead of you as a lawyer and law professor. You could be the first tenured African-American law professor at U of C, and a brilliant lawyer. You’re going to ruin all that by going into politics?”

“I’m going to be Mayor of Chicago

one day,” Obama said. Ruiz responded “You’re never going to be the Mayor of Chicago.”

Now, sitting in his Deputy Governor’s office, Ruiz says, “Obviously, he didn’t need my advice.”

Regardless, Ruiz pitched in for every one of Obama’s campaigns, even when Obama was trounced in the primaries for the U.S. House of Representatives by incumbent Bobby Rush.

“And then I was a surrogate for him during his presidential race,” Ruiz said. Ruiz would go wherever and whenever Obama needed someone to speak on his behalf. When Obama became President, Ruiz and his wife were invited to the State Dinner for the President of Mexico.

“I always say opportunities snowball the more you get involved in things in life,” Ruiz said.

Ruiz’s first job out of law school was in management consulting at Booz Allen & Hamilton. He had seen the roles that Booz Allen and McKinsey played when he was in the steel industry, and he knew

he wanted to be in a position that advised upper management.

In 1997, Ruiz was hired as an associate at Gardner Carton & Douglas (which later became Drinker Biddle & Reath). In his first years at the firm, it was not uncommon for him to bill 300+ hours a month. At his first performance review he was admonished for working too hard. But his reputation as a hard worker quickly caught the attention of senior partners who began to consider Ruiz as a candidate for board seats at not-for-profits such as Erie Neighborhood House, Chicago Commons, and the Metropolitan Planning Council.

“Gordon Nash got me involved in the CBA,” Ruiz said. “Thank God that was the culture I was taught to be a lawyer in. We worked incredibly hard for our clients, but we also worked incredibly hard for our communities.”

Focus on Education – By Chance and By Design

At the same time that he was joining



Jesse with his wife, Michele, and sons, Jonathan and Benjamin Ruiz.

not-for-profit boards, Ruiz realized his passion for education.

“If I’m going to do any public service, it should be in education,” Ruiz thought, “because my dad always emphasized to us that he didn’t have the opportunity to get a good education and he worked so hard to get us one. I thought it would be a good idea to honor my parents.”

He met Gery Chico through Latino lawyer circles. Chico was president of the Board of Education at the time, and he

appointed Ruiz to the CPS Desegregation Monitoring Commission.

Then, in what would be pivotal for Ruiz, in the summer of 2002 a law school classmate, Verónica Gómez (currently Sr. Vice President, Regulatory and Energy Policy and General Counsel at ComEd) recommended Ruiz to a former colleague who was advising a group of legislators led by then-Illinois State Senator Miguel del Valle (now President of the Chicago Board of Education). The Latino legisla-



Governor JB Pritzker congratulates new CBA President Jesse Ruiz at the CBA’s Annual Meeting on June 18.

tors were looking for a Hispanic corporate lawyer to help them form the Illinois Legislative Latino Caucus and incorporate a related foundation.

And that snowballed.

“Verónica Gómez probably never thought that when she gave that referral that it would lead to me being the Latino Caucus’ lawyer” said Ruiz. “That then led to Miguel recommending me for Chairman of the State Board of Education, which helped prepare me for my present position as Deputy Governor for Education.”

Passionate About the CBA

When asked about the CBA, Ruiz paraphrases the gospel of Luke, “To whom much is given, much is required.”

“Practicing law is a privilege and we, as lawyers, should never take that for granted. We’ve been given the privilege of earning a living by practicing law, and it’s expected that we will help our families, help our clients and help our community. And the CBA is the organization in Chicago that helps us do all that.”

Ruiz emphasized that every generation wants and needs different things from an association.

“Some people are looking for client-development opportunities. Great, we’ll provide that. Some people are looking for professional development and CLE in ways that are easier to access, and we can provide that too. Some people are just looking to socialize,” he said.

Ruiz sees the CBA as a gathering place, and he would like to see it become a hub, or incubator, for all of the Bar associations in the Chicago area.

“Let’s use this great building to bring people together,” he said. “Despite the fact that we all have different life experiences, there is a lot of commonality. The profession binds us. And if you think about the future growth of the CBA, we can’t be exclusionary; we have to be more inclusive than ever.”

Drawing on his own career and life successes, Ruiz knows the value of making connections.

“We need to become notorious for this.

If you want somebody to create opportunities for you and take an interest in you, not even knowing where they're going to go or where it's going to take you—the CBA is the place for that.”

Ruiz continued, “We have to invest in this organization to make sure that it's around another 145 years. We have to invest in our members, invest in each other as colleagues and we have to invest in our communities, so that people see the legitimacy of the organization.”

Possibly with the thought of his migrant farmworker father in mind, Ruiz said, “We have to plant a lot of seeds to lead to a great harvest down the road.” ■

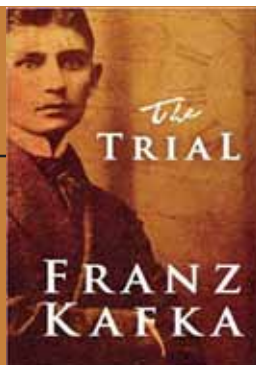
Cliff Gately is a longstanding member of the CBA Editorial Board and a law firm business development professional in Hinshaw's Marketing Department.



Outgoing CBA President Steven M. Elrod (right) passes the Lincoln Gavel to new President Jesse H. Ruiz at the CBA's Annual Meeting on June 18.

Law & Literature to Discuss Franz Kafka's "The Trial" on August 21

The CBA Law & Literature Committee will meet on **Wednesday, August 21, 12:15 p.m.**, in the Cook County Law Library's Memorial Room to discuss "The Trial" by Franz Kafka. All members are welcome to read the book and attend the discussion.



The Best Speech in Life is Free Edition: An Interview with Professor Geoffrey Stone



Listen to New CBA Podcast on Legal Talk Network

In the newest CBA @theBar podcast edition, host Jonathan Amarilio is joined by distinguished constitutional law scholar and University of Chicago Law School Professor Geoffrey Stone for a discussion about current challenges surrounding the First Amendment and free speech. They cover what constitutes a public forum on social media, whether private social media companies like Twitter, Facebook and Google have the right to censor speech, President Trump's Twitter feed, speech on college campuses, campaign financing and more. Listen at www.chicagobar.org/chicagobar/podcast. *Special thanks to our sponsor, CourtFiling.net.*

CBA

Event Calendar

Dates subject to change. See details/registration at www.chicagobar.org.

August 2019

Young Lawyers Section Boat Cruise –
August 15

September 2019

CBA Golf Outing – **September 11**

Young Lawyers Section Meet the
Committees Night – **September 12**

Welcome Reception for CBA President
Jesse Ruiz and YLS Chair
Octavio Duran – **September 18**

October 2019

Pro Bono Week – **October 21-25**

Young Lawyers Section Pro Bono and
Volunteer Fair – **October 23**