

Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Rafael Dilones and Hispanic Heritage

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insight from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

Today, we are going to honor Hispanic Heritage Month with a Diversity Dialogue program featuring a first generation American, the son of immigrants from the Dominican Republic, who grew up in Little Italy, found himself in the unlikely role of interpreter when he was seven years old, struggled to figure out where or if he fit in and whether he was fully American, as well as his journey to feeling fully accepted. Rafael Dilones is Clerk of the Richmond County Family Court.

Rafael, thank you for coming on the program, and happy Hispanic Heritage Month. Let's start with your parents if we could. How and why did they end up in New York City?

Rafael Dilones: I think they ended up here like most immigrants do in search of opportunity. They immigrated from the Dominican Republic. At the time that they did, or right before then, there was some turmoil there, some political unrest, but I don't think that was what influenced my parents coming here. It was more about the opportunities that they were seeking, getting out and trying to build a better life.

John Caher: How were they able to immigrate? Was that a simple matter or a complicated matter? Did it take a long time? What was the process?

Rafael Dilones: It did take a while. When I've spoken to my mom, especially, she said it was a long, drawn out, process in the beginning. My parents, when they started the process, they were single. By the time they landed on the Lower East Side, they were married, but they didn't come here as a couple. My father first got here and, I guess the normal sequence of events would be that he would put in papers for his wife, my mother in this case, to come. But there were already papers that were submitted when they were single. My grandmother had requested my father to come, and an aunt of my mother's had put in papers for her to emigrate here to the US. So yeah, to answer your question, it wasn't easy. It took a while and there was a process to it. But I think the US at the time, back in the late fifties to early sixties, they were looking for people to do labor, for laborers to come to the country, and I think my family was part of that, part of that wave.

John Caher: Now, did your parents eventually become American citizens?

Rafael Dilones: Yes, yes. They both did. My dad has since passed away, but they both did. I actually helped them with the process, filling out the paperwork. Also, I was there for the swearing-in ceremony. I remember standing next to my dad, and I think it's an experience that everyone should at some point have. Part of the swearing-in is that you swear no allegiance to any other flag, and that's a big thing here with my parents, and they were happy to do this. They became US citizens. They crossed that threshold. For my dad, I would think it was a bigger change for him because he felt himself to be American to a certain degree, but he also, he felt himself to be Dominican. He was very proud of his Dominican heritage, as am I, and at the time I think it was hard to bring the two together. I think now it's a lot easier for us to embrace our heritages. I think it's a little easier now than it was back in the fifties and the sixties.

John Caher: I think I understand. So the swearing allegiance makes it very permanent, very final.

Rafael Dilones: Yes.

Rafael Dilones: But it's a moment that I think everyone should experience, whether you're there just as a spectator, like I was, watching my mom and dad do it. They did it at separate times, but I was definitely impacted by it.

John Caher: I would imagine. What have they told you about life in Dominican Republic versus life in the United States?

Rafael Dilones: It's kind of a mixed bag, I think because they say that life in the Dominican Republic was hard. My parents come from the rural part of the country. They grew up on a farm for the most part, and farm life, I think like in anywhere, even here in the US, can be difficult. They're not rich. They didn't come from money. So they were limited to raising cattle or farming, doing the day labors and things like that. On a farm, it is hard.

So when they compare it to their life here, they would tell me that it was easier than what they were doing there. They weren't digging ditches and spending the whole day out on the field, but it was also difficult here. They worked long hours sometimes. Both my mom and dad had two jobs. I think my dad at one time had three just to make ends meet, and then the lack of the language didn't help. And then because of the hard life they were leading here, it didn't give them the opportunities to maybe go to night school and learn English, which made things a little bit more difficult for them.

John Caher: What did they do for a living here?

Rafael Dilones: My dad worked, I think when he first got here, in a restaurant. Towards the end, he was working in a machine shop. He was a machinist to some degree, and my mother was a seamstress. I remember as a kid, she was a proud member of the ILGWU-- the International Lady Garments Workers Union. I still remember this because she was so proud of that when she was in that union, that she was a part of that union. But he worked in a machine shop and she was a seamstress.

John Caher: That must have been a considerable cultural shock, not only coming to a foreign country, but going from rural farmland to New York City.

Rafael Dilones: It was. Recently, we were talking about that with my mom. My mom is 91, so God bless her. She's a force to be reckoned with. She was telling me that that was probably one of the biggest hurdles that they faced. When you first get here, it's a complete change -- the way that people talk, not just the language, but just how people interact. Back in the Dominican Republic, they saw family every day. Getting together with the family was a big part of life where here, because of work, if you saw them on the weekends, you were lucky and you didn't see everyone because mostly everybody worked six to seven days a week. So, you're right. It was a big shock for them to adjust to this new way of life where everything revolved around getting to work and getting the kids to school, when my brother and I came around.

John Caher: You were born here, right?

Rafael Dilones: Yes, yes.

John Caher: So you're native-born American with every right, and every privilege afforded to every other native-born American, including the right to run for president of the United States, right?

Rafael Dilones: Yes, yes, yes! My grandmother would always tell me that: "Don't let anybody tell you different. You're an American, you can be president!"

John Caher: But offline, you told me you struggled as a kid growing up in the seventies with your identity and questioned whether you are really an American. I don't understand; you're as American as George Washington!

Rafael Dilones: I didn't see anyone in the news, in the people with any kind of authority, like the police officers or the firemen. I didn't see anyone that looked like me, or close to me. When I watched a TV show, there was nobody there that resembled any part of me. There were very few people of color on TV at the time. I remember watching, I used to watch all the old World

War II movies and the cowboys like John Wayne. I never saw someone that looked like me.

So I think that that had a big part of it in terms of me asking myself, "What makes an American?" Captain America is not brown, and I'm not blonde and blue-eyed, and everything I saw wasn't representative of who I was, who I am in my skin. And I think that that's what would make me sometimes question because I felt that people would question, "Are you as American as I am?"

And the other part of that is that growing up I heard, "Why don't they speak English? You're an American now." And that's tough, especially when you're a young child. I think that that also probably has some influence on that. I think it's a complicated answer. It's a complicated situation.

John Caher: I think what you're saying, and what I hear frequently in the Diversity Dialogues, is that optics matter and that it can be very, very difficult to believe you can be what you can't see.

Rafael Dilones: That is so true. That is so true. You're a hundred percent correct.

When I was in grade school, none of my teachers were of color. They were all great teachers. I have to say, the public school I went to in downtown Manhattan. They were all great teachers and very encouraging, but I didn't see anyone that looked like me, and I think that matters. When I saw people on TV, the people that had the power did not look like me, and the people that were marginalized, they were me. They were the people that looked like me. So, you are absolutely right. Representation matters so, so much, especially to the young kids. They need to see that not only are we a member of this society, but we have a lot to contribute.

John Caher: Absolutely. Now, you also mentioned that as a little kid in Little Italy, you were thrust into the unlikely role of interpreter when you were like seven years old and not just for your Spanish speaking parents. Explain, please.

Rafael Dilones: So there was a large wave of immigrants coming into the country, especially downtown on the Lower East Side. I must've been maybe seven or eight years old, and my parents would lend me, I guess for lack of a better term, to my neighbors and I went with them, because they didn't speak English, and maybe they had a doctor's appointment that and needed to speak to somebody, or they had to go to a government office and they needed someone to help them with the process, at least

to be their mouthpiece. And back then, back in the early to mid-seventies, you didn't walk into a government office and there was somebody there. If there was somebody working there that spoke Spanish, you were lucky. But many times that wasn't the case.

John Caher: And there's all kinds of potential there for things to get lost in translation.

So I imagine in your household growing up, the predominant language was Spanish?

Rafael Dilones: Yes, yes.

John Caher: But as soon as you walked out your front door, the predominant language is English. So you are bilingual, not necessarily by choice. You had no choice, I guess. Right?

Rafael Dilones: It was forced upon us because, like you said, you walk out the door, you're speaking English, you come into the house, you're speaking Spanish, and when I was growing up, my parents spoke very little if any English at all, so we had to speak the Spanish, and when we walked out the door, we had to speak English.

John Caher: You were an interpreter in the courts at one point?

Rafael Dilones: Yes, yes. That's how I started in the court system. I took the test years ago on a fluke. I think I had just started college, or was in the middle of college, and I saw an ad in the paper. I went down, took the test, but never thought anything of it, never thought that I would ever work for government. A couple of years later, I get a notice asking me to come down for an interview. I was a little dumbfounded because I had completely forgotten about the whole process. So it was years later when I finally came to the court and was hired as an interpreter.

John Caher: Where did you go to college?

Rafael Dilones: Queensborough Community College.

John Caher: What did you take? Where did you major in?

Rafael Dilones: Business.

John Caher: Now let's shift to your current job as Family Court Clerk in Richmond County. A Family Court is an inherently stressful environment. I know some people refer to it as "society's emergency room."

Rafael Dilones: Family Court is tough, especially when you apply it to someone who doesn't speak the language. Not only are they already under stress, but then you add the stress that they can't convey what it is that's happening to them. It's a very high hurdle to overcome. I think those are probably some of the cases that really hit it home for me, you might say. Family Court is one of those pillars for our society that, if we can get it right, if we can help a family and get them on that path, help them overcome what's going on in their household, we'll be better as a society. We impact people at all stages of their life, whether it's a couple who has a child and are not getting along and they come to us to help them with a custody and visitation order to try and sort that out. That affects that child. That child has to deal with their parents, the infighting and what goes on with that or whether it's a thirteen-year-old kid who goes down the wrong path and winds up before the court.

We have a very big impact, I think more so than any other court. I think it starts with us. I think that if we can help someone at that very early stage, that is the best remedy for some of the ills that we have in our society, whether it be domestic violence or whether it be what goes on now in the schools and the juvenile delinquency and things like that, I think we will be better able to help society in that way. We are also the first people to see when there are mental health issues happening in the home because people wind up here and our jurists see that and they try and help. I do think that Family Court is core to our society and we need to pay more attention to what goes on here.

John Caher: No question.

We all bring our own experiences, our life experiences to our jobs, of course. How do you think that your experience as a child of immigrants affects the way you view your job?

Rafael Dilones: I think experience of having to go with people to the doctor's office or a government office and hearing somebody say, "Why doesn't he speak English? Tell him he has to learn English," I think that had a big impact in the way I deal with people and my empathy towards the people that come through the doors. I think that it keeps me grounded. This could be anyone. This could be my sister, this could be my neighbor. It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the fact that they don't speak English or whether they are native born. It has more to do with just the way that we treat people. You want people to be treated with respect and you want to help them. I think it's innate in all of us. I think we do that naturally to try and help people.

John Caher: You grew up with people who weren't always treated with respect and who weren't understood. It seems like an obvious source of your empathy.

Rafael Dilones: You were absolutely right.

John Caher: Tell me about your own family.

Rafael Dilones: We're tight. They were always there whenever whenever we were short a babysitter, whether it was my mother or whether it was an aunt, there was always somebody there that could take care of our kids. Both of my boys, I'm very proud of them. One is currently still in school. He's working on a PhD and my other son who graduated, he's home with us. He has a degree in biology. So, very proud. They both did what I asked. I said from day one, I said, "You guys can be whatever you want to be. You can be doctors or you can be carpenters, but there's one thing that you are going to do-- is you're going to have a college degree. And they both did that. So I'm very happy and I'm also very fortunate because, like I said before, my mother's still around and she never lets us forget the struggles that she had to get here and to go through her life.

My wife, she's an immigrant as well. She emigrated from Colombia. She immigrated, I guess in her early twenties. She also has an interesting path because her father immigrated from Germany to Colombia, so it adds to that rich diversity that we all bring to the country. My father-in-law's mother emigrated during World War II. She wound up going through, I think, from Germany to Portugal to Spain, and then they worked their way down to South America. So they also had a path that they lead down to South America.

John Caher: Now, I know in your free time you are a photographer and it's been said that photography is a universal language. Is it coincidental or do you think that springs in some way from your childhood desire to be able to communicate universally?

Rafael Dilones: I never thought of it that way until you mention it now. I think you're right. I think it does have something to do with that. It's just another way of communicating what we see, sometimes happiness, sometimes sadness, but it is a way of communicating what you see in the world and what we experience.

John Caher: What do you like to photograph?

Rafael Dilones: I do love photographing my family, to their chagrin, and now lately I've been doing more of street photography.

John Caher: Do you or your family do anything special to celebrate or commemorate Hispanic Heritage Month?

Rafael Dilones: Not really. We're Latino every day, every day of the week. The celebration is in, I guess it's in when we sit down to dinner, things like that. I guess that's the celebration that we do every day.

John Caher: Rafael, thank you so much for your time and for your insight.

Rafael Dilones: Thank you, John. Thank you, John for having me.