

## Reflections on 47 Years in the Courts: Chief Luis Varcарcel

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

Today our guest is an institution in the Unified Court System—Chief Luis Valcarcel of the Department of Public Safety. In his 47 years with the courts, Chief Valcarcel has served under nine Chief Judges and Acting Chief Judges, seven Governors, and his tenure spans nine presidential administrations. Along the way, he has experienced the growth of the Unified Court System and remarkable technological changes in the way security operations are handled. Today, we're going to probe a little bit and hopefully you'll learn more about a man who is so very familiar to so very many of us in the court system.

Chief, thank you for coming on the program. I'd like to go back to your roots. You told me offline that your parents came here from Puerto Rico. When did they come to the mainland. and why?

Chief Valcarcel: My dad endured childhood marked by severe poverty in Puerto Rico. His biological father never acknowledged him or provided any financial support. By the age of 10, he was homeless and he was surviving in the streets of Puerto Rico. Despite these hardships, my dad was resilient and never gave up. At 16, he claimed to be 18 to join the Merchant Marines, which allowed him to reach the mainland and start anew. He faced challenges head on, unafraid of hard work or the unknown, and always moved forward.

My mom grew up on a farm with 12 siblings and parents who were very, very, very, very sick. She moved forward, and in her early twenties she traveled to the mainland with her friends, determined to find a better life. She worked as a seamstress and shared an apartment with her friends. Life wasn't easy for either of them, especially with the limited English skills, and certainly trying to understand the culture that's new and surrounded them.

Eventually, my parents met and built a life together, overcoming immense challenges on the way. They face significant obstacles, including obviously the language barrier, limited education, if any, and the harsh realities of racism in New York at that time. My mom and dad were fearless, pushing through every difficulty, and ultimately rising above it all.

Through their hard work and determination, they became small-business owners, demonstrating to us, their children, the importance of ethics, perseverance, and certainly family values. Thanks to their efforts, we always had everything we needed, and more.

Relocating, whether to a different state or a country is undoubtedly a test of resilience, but moving to a place with cultural differences adds an extra layer of complexity, one that requires strength and perseverance to navigate. My parents proved time and time again that such challenges can be conquered with courage and unyielding spirit. This journey continues to inspire me today.

John Caher: What a wonderful story! Now, I want to make it very, very, very clear that your parents were not immigrants. Puerto Ricans are, of course, American citizens, but it sounds like what they encountered in New York was very similar to what immigrants encountered.

Chief Valcarcel: Agreed. While Puerto Ricans are American citizens, my parents experience as newcomers to New York closely mirrored that of immigrants. Yet they never stopped striving for a better life, a life that they wanted for their children as well as themselves.

As for me personally, their journey shaped how I view my own experiences. Growing up, I was deeply aware of the sacrifices they made and the barriers they overcame. Their stories instilled in me a profound sense of pride and determination, guiding me through the challenges of my own life. In many ways, their strength became my strength, and I carried it through lessons with me every day.

John Caher: Now, you told me offline you had a neighbor who has achieved a certain notoriety. Can you share that story with our listeners?

Chief Valcarcel: I was born in the Bronx. My parents made it a priority to connect with the other families in that same project. And they placed us all in a school called Blessed Sacrament School. Every family shared a common goal in the projects. Most of them were all from Puerto Rico. And they shared the sacrifices that would provide their children with a stronger education and greater opportunities for their future.

One memory that stands out vividly to this day is a conversation between my parents and a neighbor. Her name was Celina Sotomayor, who was the mother of Justice Sonia Sotomayor. I remember Celina visiting our apartment and discussing with my parents the important decision of which encyclopedia set to purchase for their children. The choices were

the Encyclopedia Britannica or the World Book Encyclopedia. Celina spoke passionately about her children, especially about Sonia, expressing her strong belief in Sonia's potential and determination to go to college. Ultimately, Celina chose the Encyclopedia Britannica, while my parents opted out to the World Book Encyclopedia.

But you know, as a child witnessing this dialogue, I was struck by how highly Celina spoke of her children and how focused and how driven Sonia was. It's incredible to look back and reflect on the paths our lives have taken from those conversations in the projects to the achievements that we all reached. Justice Sotomayor's story is a testament to the power of determination, strong values, and the unwavering support of a parent who believes in her children's dreams.

John Caher: Did you know Sonia?

Chief Valcarcel: I met her briefly as a child.

John Caher: Now, how, and why, and when, did you come to work for the Court System?

Chief Valcarcel: Interesting story. While attending the City University system, I came across an unexpected opportunity that would shape certainly my career.

A representative from the New York State Courts was actively recruiting uniformed personnel during a transition from New York City to the New York State jurisdictional administration. Intriguing by the idea of public service, I applied and was hired in 1977 as a provisional employee.

After taking the civil service exam, I became a permanent state employee within the Unified Court System. My first assignment was Bronx Criminal Court, which just opened in 1977. And later after taking the senior court officer exam, I was promoted and reassigned to Bronx Supreme Criminal Division, which at the time was in 851 Grand Concourse.

At the time of recruitment, I had no prior experience with the Court System and little understanding how it operated. However, the recruiters emphasized public service and it resonated deeply within me, as I always had passion about helping my community. For example, I was greatly enjoying the fact that I was a religious instructor in Blessed Sacrament, and I enjoyed it immensely.

John Caher: You served from the time of Chief Judge Lawrence Cook to the current time of Chief Judge Roland Wilson and everyone in between. Let's break

it by down by decade if we could. You were only there for the tail end of the seventies, but what were the seventies like in the courts, at least from a security standpoint?

Chief Valcarcel: Although my tenure in the courts began at the end of the seventies, that brief period gave me a strong impression of the unique challenges faced during that time, particularly the security perspective. In the seventies, New York was marked by social and economic upheaval, and the courts reflected the broader struggles of a city.

The security measures were far less advanced than they are today, primarily relying on manual protocols and certainly personnel vigilance. Technology was limited, so enduring safety required keen awareness of the surroundings and certainly teamwork among uniform personnel. That era also brought its share of significant crime rates, economic challenges. These factors inevitably affected the environment within the Court System. As a new member of the security team, I quickly learned the importance of adaptability and certainly being calm under pressure.

John Caher: What was different in the eighties? What were the eighties like?

Chief Valcarcel: It was slowly transitioning in the Court System from an environment jurisdiction from the city to the state, and we saw more standardization in the security aspect of the Court System where policies were being implemented, checkpoints were slowly being introduced throughout the state, and standardization in training, uniform force expanding in other parts of the state. Certainly it left a lasting impression in how we've evolved through the seventies, to the eighties, and to where we're at now.

John Caher: So in the 1970s, the Unified Court System came into existence. And we sought, and are still seeking in some ways, to go from a time when there were 62 or more court systems to one. Although it started in the seventies, it began to take shape in the eighties as we began to try to figure out, well, what does this Unified Court System really look like other than on paper? Is that right?

Chief Valcarcel: That's correct, absolutely. And it's slowly evolved to where we have a centralized administration, centralized protocols, policy. It allowed us to reach the public more effectively and serve the needs of the communities based on that standardization, the fact that we became one state entity.

John Caher: So then we go to the nineties. I imagine we're still working on that, but you've got to be seeing other changes, societal, technological, whatever. What were the nineties like?

Chief Valcarcel: Well, the nineties, again, still evolving. Technology was a word, a buzzword, that still was in its infancy. And computerization was being introduced to the Court System around the late eighties. We were still utilizing mimeograph machines, if we recall that, and fax machines. Checkpoints were still evolving. In the late nineties, we slowly started standardizing checkpoints equipment and we started bringing in more personnel to address policies, emergency preparedness, standardization of equipment for officers, slowly evolving into the 21st century, so to speak.

John Caher: In the eighties and good part of the nineties, I remember walking into courthouses and there was little or no security. There certainly wasn't a checkpoint. And I'd walk into judge's chambers. It was very, very open. And when did that start changing in a big way?

Chief Valcarcel: We started checkpoints, I would say, in the late eighties, nineties. Nineties, we started going full swing. In 1997, '98, I was brought into OCA in the Department of Public Safety as a captain. And in turn we standardized as a team, the equipment, same equipment across all parts of the state for all checkpoints, standardizing the policy. And that evolved right through to the beginning of 2000 where we basically took a broad brush and standardized all this security equipment, surveillance equipment into an era that allowed the agency to effectively protect the members of the public and the judiciary.

John Caher: This century, of course brought an unprecedented event, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, 2001. Where were you, do you remember, I'm sure you do, at 8:46 am on Tuesday, September 11th, 2001?

Chief Valcarcel: Yes. A day that will always be etched in my mind, to most of us, I should say, most Americans. On that morning, on September 11th, 2001, I was serving as a captain for the Department of Public Safety, attending a meeting for the Office of Emergency Management for the State of New York up in Albany, New York. Our group at the time during the meeting was redirected to their command center where we began monitoring unfolding events.

On one of the large screens, we all saw billowing smoke coming out of one of the twin towers. The phones were ringing constantly in the command center. And my colleagues and I sat watching intently trying to

process what was happening. None of us fully understood the scale of the events at that moment, but there was an overwhelming sense that we were being attacked.

As we continued to watch, I witnessed the unthinkable, a commercial airliner striking the second tower. In that instant, my heart sank. I realized that my brother who worked for the Department of Finance was in that very building. I was overcome with numbness, and I can still feel, and I recall that moment. I held onto hope in the days that followed what we as a family faced with the tragic truth that he and along with many others had lost, we had lost them in this horrific act of terror.

John Caher: I'm sorry, I had no idea.

Chief Valcarcel: Yeah. This day will remain in my soul, a day that forever changed our family. And the events of 9/11 remind me of both the fragility and the resilience of the human spirit. I carry the memory of my brother and all those that we lost with me forever.

John Caher: How long was it before you knew that your brother didn't make it?

Chief Valcarcel: I would say about 30 days. I would say-

John Caher: Holy cow!

Chief Valcarcel: Because we all felt that he was lost. In other words, he escaped, but he was in a hospital recovering, injured, or didn't know who he was, so we were grasping at straws for that. But reality started setting in when nothing was happening, the towers were down, and everybody was accounted for.

My sister and my family put a poster with my brother's face, basically telling anybody who sees this human being, please call this number. And it was plastered throughout the city, hoping for the best, hoping for the best.

John Caher: First days, it must've been frantic for you, for your sister-in-law, I mean, calling you hospitals. What all did you guys do when you're not knowing?

Chief Valcarcel: We were just numb. I think everyone was numb, panicking. His wife was lost. His children were all grasping for straws. Even then it took, I would say it took a couple of years before they found his remains. That that is like a scab that will never go away, never go away.

John Caher: Now, you just coincidentally happened to be in Albany, right? You could have been much, much closer to all this?

Chief Valcarcel: That's correct.

John Caher: Of course, a few of your colleagues were not fortunate enough to have been in Albany that day, and three of them, Captain William Harry Thompson, Sergeant Thomas Jurgens, and Sergeant Mitchell Wallace were killed. I believe they were running into a building to save other people when they perished. Did you know Captain Thompson and Sergeants Jurgens and Wallace?

Chief Valcarcel: I never had the privilege of meeting Sergeant Thomas Jurgens or Sergeant Mitchell Wallace personally, though, over the years I had the honor of meeting their families. Over the years, I was honored by that relationship.

But Captain William Harry Thompson, however, I had the good fortune to know early in my career in working in Bronx Criminal Court and we became close friends. He was a man of quiet strength and dignity with a commanding presence that left an impression on all that worked with him. His uniform was always immaculate and reflected the pride he took in his role. And he led by example, embodying the dedication, the selflessness that defined his character. Harry was a kind and generous spirit, always ready to give himself into others.

John Caher: Now, the first days, weeks after this attack, you're dealing with a whole lot. You just lost your brother. You lost three colleagues, one of whom you knew well. What was that like first personally, and what was it like professionally?

Chief Valcarcel: It left me numb for a long period of time. To this day, I still remember driving down the FDR drive to 25 Beaver Street, and how it was closed off by NYPD, and only allowing responders to go down to Lower Manhattan. Certainly the air was dark, it was a haze, and the atmosphere was very heavy, certainly with a sense of sorrow surrounding everyone being there. And to this day, I still feel the same way. The level of haze, sorrow, the memory that that day, we lost colleagues, we lost family members, will always be embedded in my heart.

My sister-in-law mentioned the story where her husband, my brother, called her and mentioned to her that he was okay and hung up. And so everybody felt that everything was fine. But my brother was an unusual human being. He had a disability, he had polio. He was the fire warden

there. As being the fire warden, he would be the last person. That was the last time that we heard from him, his wife heard from him.

When they found his remains, they found his funny bone as we referred it to, because he was a jokester, and we all as a family left knowing that he was still presenting jokes to us, but that he was still with us.

John Caher: How did 9/11 permanently change the way that the courts do business?

Chief Valcarcel: We took some major leaps after 9/11. The court facilities across the state underwent a swift and significant change to bolster all security measures. Access points were reassessed, screening procedures were enhanced. Officers were trained to respond to a range of different potential scenarios. Collaboration became essential as we worked closely with local, state, and our federal partners to share information and resources.

The sense of unity after 9/11 was shared by all of us amongst the first responder community in trying to protect members of the public. And certainly it allowed us to understand the fragility of life, but the important duties that we certainly are allowed to exercise every single day. It took an emotional toll on all of us, and the months that proceeded and the years that proceeded certainly were a testament on all of the court family to change, and to evolve, and to protect the public.

At that time, and to this day, we're still trying to recover from the sorrow of that day. But we certainly know our responsibility to the public, and we certainly evolved more than ever before during that time period. We've enacted emergency preparedness drills, policy, manuals, standardization of checkpoints, modernization of checkpoints, surveillance systems throughout the court system, access control. We've evolved so much.

John Caher: Tell me about your family, if you would.

Chief Valcarcel: I've been blessed. I have two wonderful daughters. Both of them have fulfilled my life. And they have families of their own. Jessica, an educator, has two master's degrees and worked for the city public school system. My other daughter, Christina, is an accountant. I'm immensely proud of both of them, the mere fact of their achievements, their careers, but more importantly how they've been able to balance their lives.

I am blessed with four amazing grandchildren, two granddaughters and two grandsons, ranging from ages of one month to 10 years. They bring so much joy and light to my life. They are the perfect distraction from

life's daily stresses, and they never fail to bring a smile to my face, especially when they use my bald head as their personal whiteboard!

John Caher: I am struck by the family journey. Your parents came from poverty, you've achieved a great deal in your life, and your children have achieved a great deal in theirs. That's the American dream, right?

Chief Valcarcel: Yes, it is. Yes, it is.

John Caher: So what are you going to do in retirement?

Chief Valcarcel: The million-dollar question. I know transitioning into retirement will undoubtedly for me take some adjustment, but I look forward to embracing it with the love and support from my family. I plan to stay engaged in the field of physical security, keeping up with the latest trends, and probably returning back to school to exchange ideas with future public servants.

Certainly my days are going to be filled with travel, visiting my friends and family across the country, and certainly sharing insights from my 47 years of technical and logistical experience. I know my family is extremely excited for me and I am grateful for the opportunities that I received throughout my career. And as I embark on my new path, I do so with a deep sense of gratitude and optimism for what lies ahead, and grateful to the judiciary for allowing me, for trusting in me in moving forward throughout these years. I still can't believe it's 47 years.

In the New York State Courts, the evolution has been so profound. Security measures have become far more sophisticated with advanced technology, like real-time surveillance. The digitalization of court records and the introduction of virtual hearings has streamlined processes, but also brought new challenges like cyber security concerns. The courts have also adapted to many, many societal changes, with a greater focus on diversity, inclusion, and certainly access to justice across the state, across the country.

John Caher: In the limited time we have left, one last question. Looking back at your career, what gives you the most satisfaction? What are you most proud of?

Chief Valcarcel: What brings the greatest satisfaction is knowing that I was able to make a meaningful impact, both within the Court System and the community I served. Being part of a system that upholds justice, and contributes to the safety and well-being of so many people, has been an honor beyond

words, whether it was implementing statewide security initiatives, mentoring colleagues, or simply fulfilling my daily responsibilities with integrity. Every step along the way, I felt purposeful, and it was extremely rewarding.

What I'm most proud of is the legacy of teamwork, innovation, and the dedication that I leave behind. I take a pride in having contributed to a modernization of public safety measures in the Court System, helping to bridge the gap between traditional methodologies and evolving technologies. I am proud of the relationships that I built with colleagues, peers, and the community, relationships based on trust and respect, and the sheer commitment to public service.

Knowing that my work created safer and more efficient environments for those who rely on the courts brings a sense of accomplishment that's hard to describe. But more importantly, my career and values inspired by my family, friends, and others around me give me the greatest reward of all.

As I reflect on my journey, my 47 years, I do so with gratitude for the opportunities that I had and the people I was fortunate enough to work with.

John Caher: Chief, thank you so much for your time, and thank you so much for your service, and best of luck going forward.

Chief Valcarcel: Thank you very much for your service and your contribution to the court system.

John Caher: Thank you.