

NEVADA TRAILBLAZERS

Meet Silvia Villanueva: At a Young Age, She Learned to Protect Others



BY MARY BACON, ESQ. AND RYAN GORMLEY, ESQ.

Growing up with nine siblings in Las Vegas' east side, Silvia Villanueva quickly developed a keen sense of justice, order, and autonomy as a child. As the sixth-oldest child, she judiciously defended her younger siblings and prosecuted the schoolyard bullies who flouted the rules. She was punctilious, helping to change diapers, cook dinner, and care for her nephews and younger siblings. She was an arbiter of what was fair and unfair in a world where money was tight and privilege slim.

At a young age, she learned the power of her voice as a member of her softball and basketball teams, and as a captain of her volleyball team. She saw the hardships of the world, watching family members struggle with addiction and financial stresses. However, she also saw that success was attainable as her older siblings all went off to college. Despite the adversities, Villanueva's mother and father, two immigrants with hardscrabble upbringings and big dreams, always treated their children as if they were the future leaders of the country.

She knew after her undergraduate years at the University of Nevada-Reno that she was destined to do what she had always done – advocate for people and issues.

In her early teens, Villanueva began to understand the importance of access. She depended on public transportation when other families had working cars to navigate between school, home, and jobs. She understood that she couldn't join specialized coaching or extracurricular sports leagues because of the cost. She also witnessed her family's lack of access to legal guidance and business advice.

When she didn't have access to something, Villanueva created opportunity. During her undergrad years, she was a TRIO Scholar, Wells Fargo First Generation Scholarship recipient, and recipient of the Millennium Scholarship. Despite limited financial assistance, she self-financed her studies by working multiple jobs.

Villanueva went on to graduate from the William S. Boyd School of Law on the campus of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas — just as her brother Westley did more than a decade before.

After working at a boutique law firm throughout law school, Villanueva developed a passion for a small-firm setting and the services it can provide to its clients. She set a goal to one day open her own firm. Yet, it would be a number of years until she felt the timing was right to take such a leap of faith.

Following law school, Villanueva started her career in government relations. During a legislative session in Carson

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City, she met her now-husband, Kyle Roerink, a journalist at the time covering the 2015 Nevada legislative session. His career change led them both to Washington, D.C.

After working at firms in Washington, D.C., Villanueva and her husband returned to Nevada, settling down in Reno. Over the next few years, she pursued employment and labor claims on behalf of state and local labor unions, and she represented children with special needs in due process claims.

“Some of the most meaningful work I’ve done has been fighting alongside the attorneys at Adams Esq. to ensure our young clients received their right to a Free Appropriate Public Education,” she said.

Shortly after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Villanueva made the decision to venture out on her own. Young and eager, she hung her shingle and started representing clients.

Not long after, she merged her firm with storied Carson City attorney Ernest Adler, opening Adler & Villanueva, LLC.

“Silvia is very personable, and a quick learner. Moreover, no one works harder; she will drive 40 miles to a home visit to help a client. Her dedication to her work is unsurpassed,” Adler said.

Although Villanueva grew up in Vegas, most of her time is now spent helping clients in rural areas of Northern Nevada. She’s also a regular volunteer with Nevada Legal Services, where she provides pro-bono representation in the areas of estate planning, probate, and bankruptcy.

In addition to her legal practice, Villanueva serves on the Reno City Planning Commission. The commission reviews most major development projects proposed within the city and it is responsible for making recommendations of approval or denial to the city council.

On the commission, Villanueva maintains her focus on access, taking information on the record as opposed to behind closed doors and keeping a close eye on less-glamorous details like public transportation routes.

“I have memories of my family and I waiting at the bus stop near our house to get to church on Sunday,” Villanueva said. “My experience resonates with many in the Reno community. Now, as a member of the board, I’m able to make sure that perspective is being considered.”

Her approach has garnered the praise of council member Jenny Brekhus.

“Since the mid-1990s, I estimate that I’ve worked with over 300 planning commissioners either in my capacity as planning staff or as an elected official,” Brekhus said. “At this point, Silvia Villanueva is on track to be one of the best I’ve ever observed in her approach to decision making. She brings a lawyerly perspective that can be of advantage to a planning commissioner because that perspective lends itself to an understanding of the parameters for decision making. She hones in on the policy implications first and then frames matters within the parameters of the legal regulatory framework. It is a pleasure to watch her deliberate and engage with her fellow commissioners.”

Considering her civic duties, Carson City law practice, and time in government affairs, Villanueva is known as the busy bee of her family. But what she really lives for is spending time with her husband and good friends outdoors, staying active, or escaping for the weekend for a river rafting trip.



Silvia Villanueva and her friends go rafting down the South Fork of the American River.



Silvia Villanueva and her husband, Kyle Roerink, enjoy paddle-boarding in the Galápagos Islands.



A young Silvia Villanueva dresses up in her band uniform.



Silvia Villanueva enjoys outdoors activities like snowshoeing to the top of Chickadee Ridge just outside of Lake Tahoe.

