

## NEVADA TRAILBLAZERS

# Meet Jocelyn Cortez:

**Her Passion  
for Immigration  
has Affected all  
Aspects of Her Life**



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**Jocelyn Cortez, an immigration attorney, advocate, and educator, has a tangible passion for her clients and those facing the immigration system.**

It was more than four decades ago when Cortez's parents had her and faced the difficult choice of staying in their home country of El Salvador, where they had created a comfortable life as a physics professor and medical school student, or fleeing in light of the burgeoning civil war—one that would go on to devastate the country and take the lives of more than 75,000 people. Her parents did not speak any other languages, and they knew leaving would mean starting at the bottom because their professional credentials would not be recognized in another country. However, the choice was clear for the Cortez family.

Cortez was five months old when her family arrived in the U.S. They selected Las Vegas because Cortez's grandfather, a shoemaker, already lived there, making elaborate heels for performers who danced in extravagant productions at casinos.

Upon entering school, despite growing up bilingual, Cortez was placed in ESL (English as a second language) classes since

she was a native Spanish speaker. Given her language abilities, Cortez found herself often helping translate between the teacher and the students, and helping her classmates complete their schoolwork. It was those formative experiences that made Cortez realize and embrace her passion for service.

As a student at Las Vegas High School, college was always a part of her plan. She knew it would provide additional and greater opportunities to have an impact. She strove to prepare accordingly, earning nearly perfect grades and working two jobs to save for college—one at the College of Southern Nevada, the other at Blockbuster.

Shortly before graduating from high school at 16 years old, Cortez officially became a citizen of the U.S. Having realized the magnitude her immigration attorney and an immigration judge had in her life, she became laser-focused on using her passion for service to become an immigration advocate. The reason was simple: she wanted to help families just like hers. Brimming with pride, she said: "And that's exactly what I do today. And I love every minute of it."

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Cortez went on to graduate magna cum laude from UNLV, with a degree in English, and without any debt because of the multiple jobs she worked. Following college, she pursued her dream of helping people through the immigration process, attending University of Arizona's James E. Rogers College of Law, where she served on law review, published a note on immigration patterns across the U.S.-Mexico border post 9/11, was in the Latino Law Student Association and the Native American Law Student Association group, and worked in the immigration clinic as a student attorney.

Today, Cortez's legal practice focuses on a wide variety of family immigration matters, including naturalization, adjustment of status, consular processing, complex waivers, and other consular-based immigration. It also involves representation involving relief from removal in the Executive Office for Immigration Review and representing individuals applying for humanitarian-based relief such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Temporary Protected Status (TPS), Violence Against Women Act, and U visas, which can often involve matters of life and death. For instance, Cortez recently obtained asylum on behalf of a transgender client from Mexico, who suffered abuse and violence because of her sexual identity and could not safely return to Mexico.

Outside of the courtroom, Cortez advocates for immigrant families as a member of the board of directors for DREAM Big Nevada, an organization that helps Nevada's immigrant families through direct services and by empowering community members to advocate for themselves and others in similar situations.

Cortez also serves as an active mentor for La Voz, and of the Nevada Latino Bar Association (previously serving as its president in 2012), and the Southern Nevada Association of Women Attorneys. She is also a frequent commentator on Spanish-language television and radio networks, and is a guest speaker and volunteer attorney for immigration workshops hosted around Nevada.

Cortez's passion for immigration has (happily) spilled into almost every aspect of her life. Her deep interest in immigration led her to a lecture at UNLV's William S. Boyd School of Law on Mexican migration in 2008. She struck up a conversation with the host of that lecture, civil rights professor John White (or whom most of us affectionately know as UNLV's former Dean White), which led to a lunch discussing their mutual love for "One Hundred Years of Solitude" written by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and, 13 years later, a happy marriage with two children.

In her spare time, Cortez loves to travel and has been to a new place each year for the past 21 years. She is also a foodie, and highly recommends Central, a restaurant in Lima, Peru. She has recently started learning to roller skate—with the eventual goal of being able to roller dance to her favorite 1970s and '80s jams.



Jocelyn Cortez poses in Mexico City during a volunteer trip to give educational seminars on U.S. immigration laws.



Jocelyn Cortez and her husband, John White, enjoy the beach during a trip to her native El Salvador.