



FERDINAND ALVARO

BY BROOKE BOTELLO

Ferdinand Alvaro, Jr. is partner-in-charge of the Boston office at the international law firm Adorno & Yoss and co-chair of the National Business Law Group. Adorno & Yoss is the largest certified minority-owned firm in the United States and the most diverse law firm in the country.

Color Magazine: What is the culture like within the Boston office? What philosophies are being cultivated there and how are those being executed in our community?

Ferdinand Alvaro: Although we are the largest minority-owned firm in the country, our focus is more on diversity than our minority status. The nationwide culture of the firm is based on recognition that diversity drives our success and growth and the Boston office is no exception. We take great pride in the fact that with nearly 300 attorneys, we have a demographic that closely mirrors that of the nation as a whole. Our approach is driven by a philosophy that takes a broad view of the talent pool and works proactively to identify and reward good performance. In addition to creating an environment where inclusion is the norm, this business model has resonated with our client base which is composed largely of Fortune 1000 companies whose own cultures include diversity as a core value. Community involvement is a natural outgrowth of our business philosophy. It is typical for partners in every office to be active in community affairs and Boston is no exception. At present, I am involved in initiatives aimed at creating more opportunities for attorneys of color in the Boston legal community; creating economic opportunities for minority owned businesses; fostering the development of young Latino professionals; and providing legal assistance to low income citizens.

CM: You are a distinguished professional in the legal community, what drives you to also be a leader in the development of other Latino professionals?

FA: I have been blessed throughout my career with great mentors. They have been instrumental in the outcome of my professional life. This was especially important during the early years of my career when Boston was a very different place. There were so few Latinos in positions of any significance I actually believed that I was the only Latino lawyer in a major Boston firm (it wasn't too far from true). But for a couple of senior lawyers who took me under their wing, that sense of isolation could have done great damage to my career trajectory. When I returned to Boston in 2001, after an 18 year absence, I was delighted to find that during that time a terrific group of young Latino professionals had developed. It also became clear to me that, notwithstanding the increase in numbers, many of them were still facing the same issues

that confronted me in 1980. Although it occurs to me that helping the new generation is a fitting tribute to those who helped me, the reality is that I genuinely enjoy seeing young folks, who will be the leaders of tomorrow, grow and prosper. It's a pleasure and a privilege to help them when I can.

CM: In a 2004 interview with the Boston Globe, you noted the difficulty of gaining Boston-based clients in your minority-owned law firm. In the four years since then have you noticed any changes in the city?

FA: The good news in the 2004 article was that we had been able to compensate for the thin Boston base with large companies that are based elsewhere but have business in Massachusetts. That pattern has continued over the last four years. Although we have made some local progress since then, at present, more than 80 percent of the work of the Boston office still comes from clients based outside of Massachusetts. I find it somewhat ironic that, in my practice area for example, we are doing private equity and mergers and acquisitions work for firms based in the Midwest but none for Massachusetts-based companies. That having been said, I think the city has definitely evolved significantly in the last 4 years. At the political level, it's clear to me that our leaders have recognized the importance of inclusion. I would give both Governor Patrick and Mayor Menino high grades on that front. The private sector, including the law business, has a less laudable track record. To be sure, many companies and law firms have enthusiastically embraced cultures of inclusion and are making great strides in transforming themselves. However, many others are still focusing on changing perception rather than reality. There are still too many instances of tokenism and "diversity initiatives" that look nice in marketing materials but are largely cosmetic.

CM: How important do you think networking groups are to the Latino executive community? Do these groups help in connecting the Latino community with the Boston business elite?

FA: Networking is critical to executive communities of all stripes. It is particularly important to Latinos. One of the greatest impediments to progress in the Latino community has been an inclination to identify more with people with whom we share a point of origin. Given that all Spanish speaking countries have unique histories and cultures, this is not surprising. However, it is counter productive to the cause of political and economic empowerment. Networking groups are excellent vehicles for emphasizing common points of interest and fostering a spirit of cooperation. More recently, these groups have also started to play another role. They have become natural sources of talent for organizations who are seeking a diverse pool of executive talent and, as such, have become contact points with what you refer to as "Boston's business elite" or, at least, the more enlightened members thereof.

CM: If you could partner with another Boston professional, not in the Latino community, on a diversity initiative who would it be?

FA: Ralph Martin, who is now the managing partner of the Boston office of Bingham McCutcheon, the largest law firm in town. Long before diversity became fashionable, Ralph and some other pioneers of the diversity space founded the first successful, integrated law firm in Boston. As far as I'm concerned, the minority lawyers achieving success today are standing on their shoulders. All of the guys who co-founded that firm have gone on to great success and they have my respect and admiration. However, I single Ralph out for two reasons. First, notwithstanding his enormous success, his dedication to the cause of diversity is second to none. I had an opportunity to witness this first hand on an initiative that we worked on together. The second reason is more personal. I returned to Boston seven years ago, with nothing more than an idea and a business plan - no clients and no connections. Despite the fact that, by then, Ralph had already had a distinguished political and legal career and that he and I had had no prior connection, he was one of the first people in Boston to provide support and encouragement.

As we say in my old New York neighborhood, he's the "real deal."

CM: What advice did you learn early on in your career that is still relevant to you today?

FA: First, know who you are; then have a clear vision of what you want your life to be both personally and professionally. Once you have that, Don't let a day go by where you don't do at least one thing to get you closer to the realization of that vision.

CM: Outside of your professional accomplishments, what are you most proud of?

FA: I'm not sure that I contributed enough to call it an accomplishment but the thing I'm proudest of in the world is my family. I had parents who struggled to provide me with opportunities they never had. I have a great wife and a wonderful daughter who has never failed to make me proud. My daughter is now married to a terrific guy and they are raising their own family - the grandchildren are the icing on the cake.

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