

# Get to Know Your President

*CT Lawyer had the pleasure of interviewing President Maggie Castinado for her inaugural column.*

**CT Lawyer:** Where did you grow up and how did it shape where you are today?

**Maggie Castinado:** I grew up in Mitchell, NE, with a population of 1,200. I loved growing up in small town Nebraska. It was such a simple and safe life. It was a sheltered life. Very little diversity and I grew up thinking the only difference between our family and others was that they ate with Wonder Bread, and we ate with tortillas! Once I moved to Colorado and then Connecticut, reality hit.

**CL:** Tell us more about your educational background—from your time as a Colorado State University ram to Quinipiac Law bobcat.

**MC:** My father passed away in 1989. He is the reason I am where I am today. I'm reminded of a quote that says it all: "A father loves completely, gives quietly, teaches gently, and inspires deeply." He used to say to me "Mija, don't let anyone tell you you can't. You CAN do and be whatever you want to be—reach for the stars!" Now, this is important because in my culture, women were raised to be wives and mothers; not to have an education. My mother did not complete grade school, but my father wanted all his children to complete high school and be the best we could be. So, shortly after he passed away, I registered at Front Range Community College. Despite my father's belief in me, I was not at all sure that college was right for me. I had to complete an assessment exam to determine what level of classes I should start with, but it also gave the top five career paths based

*Maggie Castinado is the 100th president of the Connecticut Bar Association and first Hispanic leader of the association. She is a past president of the Connecticut Hispanic Bar Association and a senior assistant public defender at the Office of the Public Defender in New Haven; she has defended thousands of clients with criminal matters since 1999.*



on the test results. I will never forget, the number one on my list was lawyer. I remember scoffing at this and thinking there is no way I could ever be a lawyer. Anyway, I did well in school and received my associate's degree and then transferred to Colorado State University where I focused on social work.

**CL:** What inspired you to become a lawyer?

**MC:** My father worked for several non-profits that assisted the Hispanic community. He also volunteered for VISTA to help people fill out their tax returns and created a school during the summer for migrant children. I went into social work because I knew I wanted to help people like my father did. I just didn't know how, so I volunteered in various fields and one of them was in the Fort Collins Office of Adult Probation. What started as a volunteer position turned into an internship for credit and ultimately a paid contract position. I really enjoyed my work there. The su-

pervisor, Les Rudner, ran his office with a focus on rehabilitation first with a social work perspective, and so probation officers could really help people change their lives! But it was my experience as the only person of color serving on a jury that I chose my path.

**CL:** You have worked at the Office of the Public Defender for over 20 years—what drew you to this work, and what about it has made you stay?

**MC:** Serving on that jury was the pivotal reason. As I mentioned, I was the only person of color; the defendant was Black and represented by a public defender. During deliberations, I was the only one in favor of an acquittal, so I had to explain my position. It was a clear case of racial bias which, clearly, my Caucasian venire people had no understanding of. It was a very simple explanation to them which they grasped easily, and the client was acquitted. The moral of that story for me was, coming from very humble beginnings, how easily that could have

## **“My presidential theme is *A Future Filled with Hope*, centered around three tenants: *Engage Our Membership, Educate Our Future Leaders, and Empower Our Community.*”**

—MAGGIE CASTINADO  
2023-2024 PRESIDENT

been one of my brothers on trial and because this public defender did not even consider or bring up the concept of racial bias, I thought how easily my brothers could be in jail just for the color of their skin. So, I decided to become a public defender and be the antithesis of that public defender.

**CL:** How has your time with the Office of the Public Defender shaped you as a lawyer and leader?

**MC:** It was very eye-opening and incredibly frustrating. The racial profiling and systemic racism were clear from my very first year. But at that time, everybody believed law enforcement could do no wrong. So, you had people of color being arrested mostly because of the color of their skin and the fact that they lived in poor neighborhoods. That resulted in a perpetuation of progressive prosecution as soon as a person received their first conviction. Even today, though state’s attorneys and courts have acknowledged that systemic racism exists, they still look back at a person’s criminal history no matter how old it is or how most of it is a result of racial profiling and bias.

**CL:** What is the most important lesson you have learned as a lawyer that was not taught in law school?

**MC:** So this was not taught in law school but I learned it in law school. And that’s the importance of networking. I had never been to the east coast and drove up the day before orientation, not knowing a soul. I started working at the law library and quickly joined several organizations and study groups, which became

my law school community. Then myself, along with the other two Hispanic students attending law school there, started the LLSA (Latino Law Students Association) organization, which ultimately led me to the CHBA (Connecticut Hispanic Bar Association) which I’ve been involved with ever since.

**CL:** How did your past bar leadership experience with the Connecticut Hispanic Bar Association prepare you for your term as CBA president?

**MC:** It did not prepare me at all! Very different experiences leading the CHBA, where we are like a family of about 80 members, and leading an organization of 8,500 members and where the CBA’s issues with lack of diversity were not that long ago and continues to be a struggle to engage many in caring about the issues. Yet, we persevere.

**CL:** What do you see as the biggest challenges facing the legal profession in Connecticut, and how do you plan to impact these challenges as president?

**MC:** Right now, that remains access to justice and systemic racism and racial profiling in the criminal justice system. Our Limited Scope Representation (LSR) and Pro Bono Committees will continue to address access to justice. I’m very excited to get the LSR off the ground under the leadership of Michael Dennison who has 50+ years as a public servant and just retired as a senior states attorney. He is very excited to take this on and has great ideas! Our Criminal Justice Section will be putting on sev-

eral CLEs addressing issues concerning the justice system. One in particular will speak to the current state trooper fraudulent ticket investigation. Finally, we must address the generative AI technology and how this will affect our profession. We have created the Generative AI Committee, which will be chaired by Past President Jonathan M. Shapiro and N. Kane Bennett.

**CL:** What could the CBA do to guide and prepare the next generation of lawyers?

**MC:** The CBA YLS does an excellent job of taking this on and Chair Sara O’Brien has not only made YLS a welcoming section but is “Equipped to Evolve” with the times and quickly changing legal landscape.

**CL:** What initiatives do you plan to focus on throughout your year as president?

**MC:** My presidential theme is *A Future Filled with Hope*, centered around three tenants: *Engage Our Membership, Educate Our Future Leaders, and Empower Our Community*. With the above in mind, we have already created a Generative AI Committee, a Commission on Women in the Legal Profession, and I am also establishing a Disaster Preparedness Task Force. The CBA held Helping Hands for Hawaii, a fundraising event, on September 28 in collaboration with other bar associations and affinity groups to raise funds to help those impacted by the fires in Maui. I look forward to all this bar year will bring and all that we have in store. ■