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How South Florida Lawyer Jorge Piedra Helped Push for Miami-Dade's New Civil Courthouse

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By Rachel Lean



Jorge L. Piedra of Kozyak, Tropin & Throckmorton in Coral Gables.

When Coral Gables complex commercial and construction litigator **Jorge L. Piedra** became president of the Cuban American Bar Association in 2018, there was one thing grating on him: Miami-Dade County's civil courthouse was literally falling apart.

One of the county's first high-rise buildings, it was also lacking accessibility under the Americans with Disabilities Act, it had columns blocking the middle of its more than 90-year-old courtrooms because they used to be state attorney's offices, and it didn't have bathrooms on all floors.

To Piedra, it just didn't square that Miami's courthouse was in disrepair, despite its stature in the legal community.

"I consider Miami to be one of the most important American cities. I think we have the finest trial lawyers anywhere in the United States. We have a civil courthouse that is an incredible historic relic, but it does not suffice as to a modern-day civil courthouse," Piedra said. "The building is sick, it is falling apart and this community desperately deserves a better place to go."

But not everyone was on the same page. The mayor's office, for one, was not enthralled about the prospect of footing the bill, particularly since voters had rejected a tax bump to cover it.

"I think there was a misperception that this was just going to be a playground for judges and lawyers, as opposed to being something that the entire community should be involved with, share in and be proud of," Piedra said.

So Piedra made it his mission to change minds, writing newspaper articles, setting up interviews and lobbying behind the scenes in an effort to explain how a civil courthouse can boost a community's economic engine.

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With the help of many "incredible champions," including Chief Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Bertila Soto, Civil Administrative Judge Jennifer Bailey and commissioners Sally Heyman, Esteban Bovo and Rebecca Sosa, those efforts paid off — to the tune of \$267 million.

In December 2019, the Miami-Dade commission unanimously approved the new courthouse in an unusual public-private partnership allowing developer

Plenary Group to build and operate it. It's expected to open in 2024.

Among the reasons Piedra became a commercial litigator were his parents, who owned and ran a tuxedo rental store in Westchester.

"My parents are the two hardest-working people that I ever knew, and that is certainly something that they passed on to me," Piedra said. "They also knew how to treat people, they knew how to treat their customers and they cared a lot about the quality of their work."

They were also members of the Big Five Club, a prestigious social club founded by Cuban exiles, complete with playgrounds, ballrooms, dining halls and athletic facilities.

The club was a massive part of Piedra's childhood, so when it wound up in litigation with its catering company about 20 years ago, he was all in.

"The club looked like it was going to lose the case. It looked like it was going to shut down," Piedra said. "And the president of the club, who was one of my father's best friends, took a chance on me."

After taking the case from a large firm, Piedra & Associates helped negotiate a settlement the Big Five Club was happy with, and it's still in business.

Piedra's law school experience was "not like most other people's," as he was married with a set of twins on the way by his first day.

"I think I was probably the only guy in law school with a beeper because I had to know when my wife was going into labor," he said.

Piedra went on to work for U.S. Sen. Bob Graham — someone he admired for his ability to connect with people, having gone with him to South Florida migrant camps after Hurricane Andrew and to the Immigration and Naturalization Service to get a firsthand look at the process.

"Still to this day I think he's one of the finest political leaders we've ever had in Florida," Piedra said. "I saw how he interacted with the migrants and really just wanted to help them."

To Piedra, practicing law is the best way to help a community. And what's more, when two of his best friends needed a lawyer, there he was.

The friends had closed on the premises for their mechanical contracting

business the same day his wife gave birth to a second set of twins — that's right, a second set. But now, their general contractor owed them money.

“Obviously, there was a ton of pressure because this was my two best friends and I didn't want to let them down,” Piedra said. “And all my other friends knew about this case, so, of course, if I would have lost everybody would have known about it.”

The case went all the way to a jury, which sided with Piedra.

The perils of small practices

As a small practitioner, Piedra said it always bothered him that a business owner just like his father, for instance, might not be able to afford his help. That's thanks to the exorbitant costs of litigation, which make it hard to litigate disputes under \$1 million in a way that makes economic sense.

“Small and medium-size cases cost about the same to litigate, and it's frustrating that problems that are very important to the average person and the average business are not necessarily so important when it comes to litigation,” Piedra said. “That's always been one of the biggest challenges and frustrations that I've seen in the law, and I don't know that there is a cure for that.”

It was therefore “an extremely difficult decision” to close up shop and move to a larger firm, Kozyak Tropin & Throckmorton, in 2019. But Piedra said he doesn't regret it, since it encourages attorneys to get involved in the community and prides itself on diversity and inclusion.

Now, he's handling a \$500 million RICO case in the Southern District of Florida for a Fortune 100 company.

“There's no way that I could have landed that case when I was on my own,” he said. “But through my connections, the firm's reputation and the attorneys that work here, we were able to land that case.”

Piedra also serves as pro bono counsel to the Kiwanis Club of Little Havana, which organizes Carnival Miami and the Calle Ocho festival to raise money for children in Little Havana.

Jorge L. Piedra

Born: September 1970, Miami

Spouse: Cristina Piedra

Children: Jorge Jr., Alexandra, Annie, Lillie and Charlie

Education: Florida State University, J.D., 1996, B.S., 1992.

Experience: Of counsel, Kozyak Tropin & Throckmorton, 2019-present; Managing partner, Piedra & Associates, P.A., 2001-2019; Attorney, Phillips, Eisinger & Koss 1996-2001.