

LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

Raoul Cantero

Miami OEP Raoul Cantero gives advice to his younger self.

I was born in Madrid, Spain, in 1960. My parents had recently fled the communist dictatorship in Cuba and, within nine months of my birth, we moved to Miami.

I went to Catholic schools at a time when the influx of Cubans into Miami was just beginning. There was a lot of bigotry to overcome before we were fully accepted, which made school challenging at times – although even by the mid- to late-1960s, there was already a critical mass of Cuban students in the Catholic schools.

When I complained to my father about the bullying at school, he insisted that I defend myself. Though that required courage, it worked. I also played in the school football team, which helped me to fit in.

My father had gone to law school in Cuba, but followed a career in law enforcement, so I had an aspiration of joining the FBI, probably as a lawyer.

With that in mind, I went to Florida State University with the intention of studying Criminology. At the time, FSU was one of two universities on the east coast with a school of criminology. It was the only college I applied to, so I could also stay close to my then-girlfriend, Ana.

Though I ended up majoring in English and Business rather than Criminology, it was the right choice – Ana and I have now been married for 39 years.

English turned out to be an inspired option because writing is such an important skill for a lawyer. I also took several courses (called a minor) in both Maths and Philosophy, which taught me logical thinking and a knowledge of numbers, all vital skills they don't teach you at law school.



In the high school football team (I'm No.41)



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My professors at the time were a big inspiration to me. My fiction-writing professor demanded that students turn in one short story per week, which he'd mark and grade. But he allowed us to resubmit each story as many times as we wanted to improve our grade. I took full advantage and, while it was the hardest semester of my college career, I learned so much.

From there, I went on to Harvard Law School, which was another big culture shock.

Half the students came from Ivy League undergraduate schools and half from New York or New England, so it was hard to fit in.

It didn't help that Miami Vice was on TV at the time, so my fellow students assumed I was either a drug addict or a drug dealer. Nevertheless, I made lasting friendships at law school with people who, like me, didn't really fit the Harvard model.

After law school, I completed a judicial clerkship at the federal court in Miami. The judge I clerked for has a big influence on me. He was always open minded, showed a lot of respect and dignity in the court room and didn't take himself too seriously.

While he made me want to become a judge, my big dream was to be a novelist, so I applied for a scholarship in creative writing and was accepted into the Fulbright Program in Panama as a creative writer.

Ana and I moved to Panama and she worked at the international school while I wrote short stories and read about Latin American history and literature.

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In the months that followed I attended several demonstrations and even got shot at. Ana and I joke that it was our year of living dangerously, but everything changed the following year when we discovered we were expecting our first child, Christian.



Ana and me 1970s style



“Would my 17-year-old self be surprised at where I am in my career? Well, if I told him I was at one of the best law firms in the world and was head of its Miami office he’d have thought I was hallucinating!”

We moved back to Miami and I faced a big decision:

I could be a lawyer, a father and a writer, but realistically I could not be all three, so I gave up my dream of being a novelist to focus on law and fatherhood.

I accepted a job as an associate at a small firm full of state prosecutors who loved making jury arguments but hated writing, which meant they gave the major memoranda and appeals to me. Over time, I started to build up an appellate practice.

Fourteen years later, in 2002, one of the justices of the Florida Supreme Court announced his retirement. Many of my friends told me the governor was keen on appointing the Court’s first Hispanic justice, so given my specialty in appellate practice they encouraged me to apply.

When I asked Ana if she’d be happy for us to move to Tallahassee for the job she initially said no, but we decided to pray about it and put the decision in God’s hands.

I got the job and in July 2002, holding the position until 2008, when we decided to move back to Miami to be with our extended family.

In the weeks that followed, I was contacted by several law firms who were interested in employing me, including White & Case.

The then Miami-OEP Victor Alvarez was my high-school classmate, and I also knew the head of litigation Rudy Aragon, so we met up for dinner and hit it off. I later travelled first to Miami, where I met with every partner, and then to New York to meet other lawyers including David Hille, Glenn Kurtz, Chris Shore, Tom Lauria, Hugh Verrier and John Reiss.

White & Case seemed the ideal choice.

I liked the people, and it had the largest Miami office of all the non-Florida firms. It also offered a greater national and international platform.

I accepted the job in August 2008 but, by the time I joined in October, Lehman Brothers had collapsed and the whole world imploded financially.

That meant my introduction to the legal community in Miami didn’t quite go as planned but, as I got to know people and build a reputation, my practice grew rapidly.



My wedding day

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Since then, I’ve handled almost 200 appeals and 100 oral arguments at White & Case. There have been so many memorable cases, but one that stands out is when the State of Florida asked us to appeal a judgement against their intended introduction of mandatory pension contributions for public officials in the state.

You can imagine the challenge of arguing to state judges (themselves on the public payroll) that the change was constitutional, but we won in what was an extremely important case for the state—saving it US\$1 billion/year in expenses at a time of financial crisis.

I also enjoyed representing the Florida Senate as they attempted to redraw state congressional districts from 2012-2015.

They faced four years of litigation before getting the changes through and it was the first time in the history of Florida that state legislators had testified in court about the redistricting process. It was extremely gratifying to get the victory after such a long battle.

I’ve greatly enjoyed my time as OEP of the Miami office since I took up the position in 2019. It is such a privilege to lead our office because the lawyers and Business Services professionals are so loyal and dedicated.

If I were to offer career advice to my younger self, it would be to create relationships and seek out mentors you admire. That’s something I’ve benefited from, but I could have done more.

I’d also stress the value of doing extra-curricular reading to accelerate your development and to work on improving your writing – one of the most fundamental skills you need as a lawyer.

Improving the client experience is something I’m passionate about and one secret to achieving that is being responsive. We also need to be realistic during challenges, so clients don’t get any nasty surprises, but offer them solutions when issues arise.



Celebrating Halloween with my colleagues on the Florida Supreme Court

Would my 17-year-old self be surprised at where I am in my career? Well, if I told him I was at one of the best law firms in the world and was head of its Miami office he'd have thought I was hallucinating!

I never fulfilled my dream of writing a novel, but my younger self would be pleased to know I've used those skills in my career and to write articles for law journals.

Outside work, I'm involved in several Catholic organizations.

I'm a Knight in the Order of Malta, an international order dedicated to service of the sick and the poor, which recently gave me the opportunity to travel to Lourdes, France, where I joined fellow knights from all over the world in helping sick people who had come to bath and wash in the healing waters. It was very inspiring.

If I was to relive one day of my life it would undoubtedly be my wedding day. We were so busy talking to everyone that it's impossible to take everything in or to fully understand its significance.

Finally, if I could have one last conversation with someone who is no longer with us, it would be with my father.

He got sick unexpectedly with acute pancreatitis when we were living in Tallahassee and, by the time we got to the hospital, he was unconscious and didn't recover. I'd tell him how much I loved him and how much of an influence he's been on my life and the lives of my children.

They remember him vividly and we talk about him all the time.



Showing my granddaughter, Catalina, my portrait at the Florida Supreme Court