



## Ten Years after Receiving an LMJ Scholarship:

# Finding the Class of 2005

By Glenn Cook

**Patricia Astorga** knows she would not be where she is without help from others. Now, as a corporate attorney with a top New York City law firm, she's making it her life's work to give back.

"Not a day goes by where I think I could have done this on my own," says Astorga, who in 2005 was one of the first recipients of the Minority Corporate Council Association's LMJ Scholarship. "I grew up with an early awareness that I was different from others and that I was discriminated against, and in a lot of ways that shaped my views on our responsibility to help others who have faced similar circumstances."

Astorga, who knew limited English when she moved to the U.S. from the Philippines at age eight, is now an associate at Milbank Tweed Hadley & McCloy. She also is a director of the Filipino American Legal Defense and Education Fund, an organization that specializes in pro bono legal services and "know your rights" programs for the immigrant community.

This pay-it-forward approach is what the LMJ Scholarship has helped engender over the past 11 years. More than 160 first-year law students, all highly qualified but facing steep financial hardships, have received the \$10,000 award from MCCA. Many also have received funds from the organization for their second and third years in law school, as well as internships from MCCA members.

Today, those who have finished law school have gone on to varied careers in the corporate, government and nonprofit worlds (see sidebar on page 62). Over the next several issues, *Diversity & the Bar* will profile scholarship recipients from each class and look at what they're doing now to make a difference.

### Mom Knows Best

Like Astorga, many of the scholarship recipients are first- and second-generation immigrants who have had to overcome significant cultural and socioeconomic barriers.

Astorga faced hurdles as a young child. Her parents had split up, which was frowned upon in Manila's deeply Catholic community already facing a difficult economic and social transition at the end of the Marcos regime.

"Being the child of a single parent poses extra challenges, and I certainly faced some discrimination because of it," she says. "It was more so in my everyday life, with people asking, 'Why are your parents not together?' I was having to deal with circumstances that weren't 'normal.'"

When she was eight, Astorga's paternal grandmother pulled her out of school and brought her to Jersey City, N.J., without telling her mother, Diana. When she found out, Diana "gave up everything—her career, her home—and flew here to be with me."

"I didn't know much about what was going on at the time. But my mom raised me and put me through school there," Astorga says. "I grew up in a predominantly immigrant community. People

took it on themselves to help us, to help my mother get a job, to help me adjust to school, to help me learn English. That made a huge impact on my life."

Astorga also learned her first lesson about the law from her mother, who made sure the proper paperwork was filed so she could eventually become a U.S. citizen.

"My mother taught me that the law affects the everyday lives of the people around you," Astorga says. "She compared it to knowing the rules of the game. You can't win the game if you don't know the rules, and to succeed in this environment, you needed to know the rules of the law."

The MCCA scholarship opened up doors I never knew existed in the law.

### Do the One Thing that Scares You the Most

Astorga's mother taught her another valuable lesson: "Always do the one thing that scared me the most." So as a freshman at McNair Academic High, she decided to join the school's mock trial team.

"I was painfully, painfully shy," she says. "I could not get up and do public speaking in front of an audience, but I joined the mock trial team because my mother urged me and pushed me to do so. I realized I loved researching and forming arguments and analyzing facts and the law. Most of all, I really loved being in court."

Astorga finished her bachelor's degree magna cum laude at New York University. Then, thanks in part to the MCCA scholarship, she earned her law degree at Cornell. As an undergraduate and law student, she took advantage of every internship opportunity available. Ultimately, she completed six internships, ranging from work in a real estate law office to a legal aid society to stints for Sen. Hilary Clinton and the attorney general's office in Washington, D.C.

"The MCCA scholarship opened up doors I never knew existed in the law," she says. "It gave me an opportunity to work as an intern in a large firm (Astora Seneca) and to learn what the in-house legal function is like. Because of my other internships, I knew what my clients' business was like, and I understood their

demands. The Astora Seneca internship gave me a big picture view of what practicing in a large firm would look like.”

After graduation, Astorga spent almost five years as an associate at Weil Gotshal and Manges. There, through her work with FALDEF, she became involved in Jose Antonio Vargas’ protracted immigration battle. The Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and documentarian made headlines when he wrote about growing up in the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant.

“The only difference between us was I have a piece of paper saying I’m an American citizen, and his situation and struggle made me think of how much harder my life would be if I didn’t have that piece of paper,” Astorga says. “It could have very easily happened to me if my mom didn’t know better. When the story broke, I contacted him and said I wanted to work on his case directly. I got the firm to provide pro-bono assistance. For me, that was the most meaningful work I’ve done, helping someone with such a similar story to mine.”

At her current firm, Astorga is focusing on white-collar litigation. Despite the pull she feels to help others with similar stories,



she enjoys corporate law and wants to balance the two different places in her life.

“What really impressed me about big law was the quality of attorneys that are out there,” she says. “I wondered at the time if there were attorneys I could see myself emulating five to 10 years from now, and I’ve found that in the two firms I’ve worked for and in the clerkships I’ve done. This work will only make me better.”

Now that she is settled in her job—and is the mother of a soon-to-be toddler—Astorga is thinking of ways she can continue to help those who are less fortunate. With her own money, she is starting a foundation in the Philippines for children of single mothers who are interested in pursuing a law career.

No matter where she goes, her mother’s advice sticks with her. “When I think of the plight of all undocumented immigrants who wanted a better life in the United States, I can’t help but think of my mom telling me that I have to know the law and what to expect here. I’ve been very, very fortunate to have her encouraging me to do that.” ■

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## The first recipients of the Minority Corporate Counsel Association’s LMJ Scholarship have gone on to varied careers in the corporate, government and nonprofit worlds.

### Here is an update on the Class of 2005 and what they are doing now:

- **Heidy Abreu** is corporate counsel at Sarepta Therapeutics Inc., in the Greater Boston area.
- **Andrea Arias** is an attorney at the Federal Trade Commission’s Division of Privacy and Identity Protection in Washington, D.C.
- **Patricia Astorga** is an associate in the New York office of Milbank Tweed Hadley & McCloy. She also is a board member on the Filipino American Legal Defense and Educational Fund.
- **Theodore Bynum III** is an associate in the Technology, Manufacturing and Transportation division of Husch Blackwell in St. Louis.
- **Martha Casillas** is an attorney for the California Department of Industrial Relations in the Greater Los Angeles area.
- **Rosario Daza** is a staff attorney for the Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors Project at the Northwest Justice Project in Seattle.
- **J. Steve Franco** is an associate attorney with the Ratto Law Firm in Oakland, Calif.
- **Tarik Gause** is an associate in the Capital Markets Group at Shearman & Sterling in Sao Paulo, Brazil.
- **Maria E. Jones** is corporate legal counsel at Oracle in San Francisco.
- **Emily Liu** is associate director and manager of diversity and inclusion at Emory Law School in Atlanta.
- **Bendita Malakia** is vice president and assistant general counsel at Goldman Sachs in Irving, Texas.
- **Gerron McKnight** is labor and employment counsel at The Christ Hospital Health Network in Cincinnati.
- **Brenda Pacouloute** is an assistant public defender for the Broward Public Defender’s Office in the Miami/Fort Lauderdale area.
- **Nathan Perez** is managing director of David Taussig & Associates in San Jose, Calif.
- **Timothy Reed** is an associate attorney at Ogletree Deakins Nash Smoak & Stewart, PC in San Francisco.
- **Samuel Roe** is director of public policy and special initiatives for Citizen Schools in Washington, D.C. He also served as an innovation advisor and ConnectED fellow at the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Technology.
- **Ebony Smith Sampson** works as a broker at Metro Commercial Real Estate in the Philadelphia area.
- **Christy Bedonie** died in September 2013 at age 39. A member of the Navajo Nation, she received her law degree from UCLA before representing tribal governments at the firm of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld. She also worked on the staff of Rep. Brad Carson, the National Indian Gaming Commission and the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. She also previously served as an attorney with Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, where she represented tribal governments.

Details about the **LMJ Scholarship Program** can be found at [www.mcca.com/scholarships](http://www.mcca.com/scholarships). If you are interested in working with this or donating to this program, contact Aracely Muñoz Petrich, vice president of strategic development, at [aracelymunozpetrich@mcca.com](mailto:aracelymunozpetrich@mcca.com).