

## Practice What You Preach

*The municipal law specialists at the OMLO firm celebrate diversity and inclusion in practice.*

By Shane Nelson

Special to the Daily Journal

**B**orn and raised in southeast Los Angeles, Stephanie Vasquez grew up not too far from Bell Gardens, where she now serves as city attorney.

“Working with the communities in this region and working with minority population communities - it really hits home with me,” Vasquez said. “My family is also living in this area. My friends - they’re all here. ... It makes me feel like I’m not just helping the cities, but I’m also helping my family and friends. Having grown up here and seeing the changes, it’s nice to know I’m contributing.”

Vasquez was named partner in February at Olivarez Madruga Law Organization LLP (OMLO), where she’s worked in the Los Angeles-based firm’s municipal law practice since 2019. Along with her city attorney role for Bell Gardens, Vasquez also works as deputy city attorney for El Monte and San Fernando.

“I assist the cities with trying to pass any laws, negotiation of contracts, with elections,” Vasquez explained, “just ensuring that we’re meeting the goals the city is trying to achieve as well as answering questions the residents bring to the council.”

A 2017 Loyola Law School graduate, Vasquez is one of a dozen attorneys tackling municipal law matters at the boutique, working for several different municipalities across the Los Angeles area. OMLO’s municipal law practice is headed up by firm co-founder and



From left, Stephanie Vasquez, Paloma Perez-McEvoy and Stephanie Arechiga | Justin L. Stewart / Special to the Daily Journal

Managing Partner Rick R. Olivarez along with Paloma Perez-McEvoy, who was named partner in February.

“We’re very involved in the day-to-day management of these cities,” said Perez-McEvoy, who is the assistant city attorney for Cudahy and deputy city attorney for Bell Gardens and La Puente. “No two days are alike. Some days it feels like there’s a new phone call popping up every two to three minutes, where there’s been a novel question presented or a new emergency that needs to be addressed right away.”

Perez-McEvoy, who joined OMLO a little over a year ago, grew up in Sacramento and started working for state legislators there while she was

still in high school. A 2008 McGeorge School of Law graduate, Perez-McEvoy went on to work for eight years with elected officials at Los Angeles City Hall, representing council members from the San Fernando Valley and south Los Angeles. She also spent time at an international firm, representing developers in land use matters, acquiring entitlements and CEQA compliance before she came onboard OMLO.

“The work we do for these public entities - it’s to the benefit of the city’s residents,” Perez-McEvoy said about her practice. “And what I find fulfilling is the work I’m doing is intended to improve or help out the very people that we live amongst and walk with and shop

with and dine with at the end of the day.”

OMLO associate Stephanie A. Arechiga joined the firm in 2019 and works these days as the city attorney for Cudahy.

“Cudahy has a very young council,” said Arechiga, who described herself as a millennial. “I feel like I’m around the same age as most of them - within like 10 years at least. And I really enjoy getting to see newer ideas being brought in.”

A 2017 Whittier Law School graduate, Arechiga grew up in San Bernardino, which she said has “very similar demographics to the city of Cudahy.”

“I’m Latina,” Arechiga said. “And the [Cudahy] council currently

has three Latina women serving, so I feel at home. ... It feels very inclusive, and I feel like it's somewhere I belong. I don't feel like I'm the odd woman out, and I really like that. Honestly, the fact that we have a woman majority is probably one of my favorite things."

Perez-McEvoy noted that a majority of OMLO's municipal law group is made up of female attorneys, and many of the cities the firm represents feature majority female city councils.

"That diversity matters," Perez-McEvoy said. "And decision makers notice in a positive way. ... We have three Latinas as city attorney. How many attorneys do you even know that are Latina?"

Perez-McEvoy pointed to a 2023 state bar report that found while California's population is roughly 37% percent Hispanic or Latino, only 6% of the approximately 196,000 active attorneys statewide are Hispanic or Latino. That same report

found that only 18% of California's attorneys are women of color.

"The reason why that matters is because we have particular life experiences. We have particular situations we've lived through," Perez-McEvoy explained. "[For] some of our clients, their residents are working class families, working two to three jobs to make ends meet, having a hard time finding childcare. ... These are things some of us have lived through ourselves, and we're able to provide that insight when we're creating these policies, and we're helping to be a part of this process. That's something I think is particularly rewarding, and I think is really of value in the work we do."

Partner Christine K. Hsu, who joined the firm in 2011 and heads up the education law group, agreed that OMLO's diverse makeup is meaningful to the boutique's clients.

"Our firm mirrors a lot of our clients and the students and the citi-

zens of the cities we represent, and I think that's important," said Hsu, who works with 11 different California school districts - including the El Monte Union High School District, Centinela Valley High School District and the Rosemead School District.

"I think it's great when students come to a board member meeting, and they can see an Asian female at the dais," Hsu continued. "That's not always a prevalent thing, and so I think it's great that we really practice what we preach."

OMLO Managing Partner Olivarez, who founded the shop back in 2010 with longtime litigator Thomas M. Madruga, said there weren't many minority-owned law firms handling municipal law back when they launched the boutique.

"Not to mention the fact that we were competing with other municipal firms that have been around for centuries, so it was really difficult to get started," Olivarez re-

called, noting OMLO is now home for 30 lawyers. "And I want to make sure that others that come and join the firm have a much easier time. ... It's hard to develop a book of business and grow your practice unless you have an opportunity to be the appointed city attorney."

The son of longtime U.S. Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard, Olivarez noted that offering opportunities to young women attorneys has been especially important to him.

"There aren't a lot of female city attorneys in LA County or in Riverside County - or actually throughout the state of California," he said. "And whether it's in the education group or in the municipal group - I think once people see how competent these women are and how good they are at their craft and their jobs, I think what's going to happen is their practice is just going to continue to grow."

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