

MONDAY, JULY 21, 2025

Women- and Minority-Owned Law Firms

Brick by brick: OMLO's rise as a minority-owned powerhouse in California law

When Thomas M. Madruga and Ricardo Olivarez began talking about starting their own law firm, it was almost a joke between old colleagues. “We should just start our own firm. You know, we could handle that,” Madruga recalled telling Olivarez.

At the time, the two were young lawyers crossing paths in litigation and city attorney work. But as they stayed in touch over the years, that joke turned into a serious conversation. “Fast forward another 15 years or so after that, we would keep in touch and always talk. And then an opportunity came. He was, I think, a city attorney and there was some room for growth. And he said, ‘What do you think about joining?’”

So, in 2010, Madruga joined Olivarez’s small firm, then just two or three lawyers, and they committed to building something bigger. Today, the Olivarez Madruga Law Organization LLP—better known as OMLO Law—has grown into a firm of 40 lawyers, serving dozens of cities and public agencies across California.

From the start, Madruga and Olivarez agreed on how they wanted the firm to grow. “We made a pact to sort of build it the right way, you know, brick by brick rather than going too fast,” Madruga said. “At the top of our list was to make sure we hire quality people... You can always teach somebody to be a good lawyer, but you can’t teach quality.”

For Madruga, the emphasis on integrity and reputation was non-negotiable. “Ethics were always at



Thomas M. Madruga

the fore—to do the right thing. Reputation, it may take years to build, but it can be destroyed in a day. And so, we were cognizant of that.”

The firm’s identity as a minority-owned practice grew naturally out of Olivarez’s background. His grandfather, Edward R. Roybal, was one of the first Latino congressmen and a founder of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. Roybal also helped establish the National Association of Latino Elected Officials.

“Rick has a history,” Madruga said, adding that Olivarez felling a “responsibility to reach back to his community.”

While Madruga himself is not Hispanic, he was committed to supporting Olivarez’s mission. “We also thought it would be something to make sure we give opportunities to folks who, you know, didn’t otherwise, who are fighters and maybe had to



Paloma Perez-McEvoy

pull themselves up from their own bootstraps,” he said. “And I think we made a pact to also reach out to groups of folks—not just Hispanic minorities, but all minorities. I think if you look at our website, you’ll see a pretty eclectic group there. Because I think it’s the right thing to do.”

OMLO’s commitment to diversity is more than a recruiting talking point. “Networking is key, and there’s a lot of minority networking. And sometimes you tend to get some of the better folks that are within that network. And I think that’s helped.”

For Paloma Perez-McEvoy, who joined OMLO in 2023 and now co-leads the municipal law group, the firm’s diversity was a key draw. “I was very much drawn to [the fact] that it was a minority firm,” she said. “With, I think, minorities overall, probably being very vastly under-represented in the legal profession,

I found it really interesting that there was this minority-owned firm that was very diverse in terms of their attorney makeup, also representing a diverse array of cities throughout Los Angeles County.”

As a first-generation lawyer herself, Perez-McEvoy said she appreciates the comfort of working with colleagues who share similar experiences. “There’s a level of comfort in being able to rely on each other and ask those questions that maybe you might be a little bit more fearful to ask when you’re that much of a minority in terms of, you know, somebody who’s been familiar with the lawyer life their entire upbringing versus somebody who is venturing into the unknown.”

OMLO’s minority-owned status has also helped it connect with public entities serving diverse populations. “There’s lots of public entities, cities and school districts that we have that are necessarily tied to certain minority Hispanic communities,” Madruga said. “Once you do really quality work and you also support that community on top of it, it builds a relationship that I think is stronger than just, ‘Hey, we want to make money off you, but we don’t want to do anything else.’”

Perez-McEvoy agreed. “Everybody carries with them a unique set of experiences that shapes their thoughts, their beliefs, the way in which they make decisions in life,” she said. “Working in LA County, which has to be one of the most diverse areas of the nation, there are a lot of different experiences that we

take with us. Sometimes we're able to take those experiences into consideration when we're making recommendations to our client cities."

Growing from four lawyers to 40 hasn't been without challenges. "Early on, we were more of a very tight-knit... I don't want to say family, I think that's too cliché," Madruga said. "But we were a tight group and did things together. And as you grow, those things tend to be less available."

To maintain culture, OMLO invests in its people. "We bring in lunch

two or three times a week for the firm—not just the lawyers, but the staff," Madruga said. "It's a small price to pay, but it's a large benefit to have everyone break bread together at lunchtime."

For Perez-McEvoy, leadership means maintaining an open-door policy and watching out for burnout. "In a field as... burnout is a real thing in the legal profession, but I think in particular in the practice of municipal law," she said. "I think even recognizing that and making sure that people are able

to take that personal time to themselves to recharge and to be excited about coming back to work and engaging in the work again."

At OMLO, young attorneys are encouraged to take on responsibility early. "When you come here, you start practicing as a lawyer on day one," Madruga said. "With some other firms, you're looking at documents and doing menial tasks and research for way longer than you should be."

He added: "I always tell the youngsters here, if you want to be a great lawyer or you want to build your

profession and you want to help the communities that we like to help, you'll always have a spot here."

For Perez-McEvoy, the firm's intentional growth and collaborative culture are key to its future. "We don't necessarily want to take on just any client for the sake of taking a client," she said. "And I think that it's really important to find folks that vibe with your general office culture. I think we have a really collaborative culture here."

david_houston@dailyjournal.com