

Manny Velasquez: An American Dream Story

Based on an Interview of Mr. Velasquez by Tracey Lenox in September 2012

Manny Velasquez was born on July 16, 1929, on the wrong side of the tracks in Phoenix, Arizona. His maternal grandmother raised him and his siblings, and they all went to the local elementary, the designated Hispanic school. Arizona had just become a state in 1912, and segregation in education was typical, as it was in other areas of the country. South Phoenix south of the railroad tracks was the barrio, full of kids just like Manny. But after elementary school, things began to change in Manny's life. And they changed because Manny decided to change them.

"I finished sixth grade and I was going to start seventh and eighth," he said. "I didn't want to go to Lowell, which was where all the barrio kids went to and all my buddies, and there was going to be a lot of fighting, and I didn't want to do that.... So what I did, I went across the tracks to Adams." Adams was the middle school for the non-Hispanics, eight blocks away to Lowell's eleven blocks. "And then I was scared. You see, because I was the only Latin there, I mean, a Mexican...and everybody else was Anglo," he told me. "And that's how...when I crossed the tracks, I really crossed the tracks."

He took his diploma from the elementary school, went to his chosen middle school on the first day, and then took a seat in the back of the seventh grade class. A teacher approached him and asked, "Son, are you in the right place?" When he responded yes and handed her that diploma, she showed him how to register in his new school, and that was the end of that. He was on his way to the making his own version of the American Dream.

He did well in school, and he listened carefully to the advice given by the adults in his life. His grandmother, he says, taught him three things, "You're honest, you work hard, and you're clean." When he finished high school, his patriotism led him to join the U.S. Army, beginning in 1948 until 1954. He was involved in the Korean Conflict, where his job was to dig up mines. When he resigned his commission, he went on to Shepherd College in West Virginia, where he got his teaching degree. During this socially turbulent time for the country, Manny was often aware of his own difference from the people he associated with, and he carried a fear of discrimination, of not fitting in. To this day, he wears a coat and tie every time he flies, so he can't be targeted as "not belonging."

After Shepherd, he contemplated going back to Arizona to go to law school, but another of those mentoring adults stepped in. While in Arizona, a friend had him and his wife Louise over to dinner one evening. Knowing some of the troubles that Manny had overcome during his childhood years, he said, "You don't belong here in Arizona anymore. You go back East. Go to law school there."

In 1962 he attended law school at American University, where he was a classmate of the future Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia. He worked hard in the political realm as well, as a clerk to Senator Hayden from Arizona. His involvement in politics, and a penchant for speaking out on behalf of the disenfranchised and the needy, at this point became a pattern that has continued throughout his life, even up to the present day.

Out of law school, after leaving the Senator's staff, he started working in Arlington for a law firm and then for State Farm as a claims man. Then the move to Manassas came. In the early 70s, he got together with a friend in banking and they decided to open a bank in Manassas; in fact, the first new bank in Manassas in 43 years—First Manassas Bank and Trust.

"The reason we came to Manassas was because it was growing. We could see it was growing." Louise was a nurse at the time, doing shift work. When they used Louise's retirement to buy his law office on Center Street in 1975, he was highly motivated to do whatever came in the door. "The first time a client comes in, and you tell him, Oh, well, I don't do that kind of work or you say, let me study this and you come back tomorrow, that's the last time you're going to see him. You have to dig into everything."

And hard work was always his mantra. While interviewing for his first legal job in Arlington, he told the partners interviewing him, "Look, I'm not very smart, ...but I can outwork any of you." And they went across the street to a little coffee shop and came back, and said, "you're hired." The rest of his career in Manassas is peppered with all the familiar characters of the 70s and 80s Prince William Bar and larger community: Turner Smith and Jim

Davenport, Mac Rice, Ed McGolrick, Lacey and Claude Compton, , Bernie Bowles, Richard Potter, Herman Whisenant, Peter Steketee , Ed Flournoy and Joe Gallagher, and a whole host of others.

And so for nearly 40 years he has put his heart and soul into the Prince William legal community, while also continuing to make time for activism at the local and national level for the Hispanic community. And he echoes the sentiments of other older members of the Bar when he talks about the values that have guided his work: “the civility ... the Bar has to promote and not let go....and to be courteous, with Bar members, and everybody else.”