

# ATJ PRO BONO CHAMPION

## ALBERTO GARCIA

*Law Office of Alberto Garcia, Austin*

*After more than 40 years of practice, Austin attorney Alberto Garcia has a lengthy list of professional accomplishments, including service as Travis County's first Latino judge. Now focusing on criminal law, Garcia operates a solo firm in the Capital City. Still, some of his most impressive work is what he does as a volunteer—giving a voice to those who have none.*

### **How did you get started on this path?**

My first job after law school was with Travis County Legal Aid. I was making \$600 a month in '72, so it was no money at all, but I felt lucky. With Legal Aid, it was easy to get a real understanding of the need for legal services for poor people. We dealt mostly with women who would come in with family issues—child support, custody, abusive spouses. It was easy for me to get involved and not forget that a lot of people in my community need services and cannot afford them. When I started in private practice, I started doing pro bono family law cases for Volunteer Legal Services (VLS).

### **What pro bono work do you do now?**

I still volunteer with Volunteer Legal Services, but I now do it at the legal clinics held twice weekly. Our local Catholic diocese gets volunteer lawyers, and I'm part of that group. The clinic provides legal services to the poor in most non-fee-generating cases. I volunteer in the general law section. Most of the clients have issues with probate, real estate, and contract issues. The clinics also have family law section, but I don't get involved with that area. A lot of the cases we handle are solved by providing legal advice only and, if not, they are referred to either Texas Rural Legal Aid or VLS for formal representation. I also had the honor this past year of volunteering with the UT Immigration Clinic, assisting young men and women applying for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

### **Are there any services that are in demand in Austin that are unique to the area?**

Austin has a large immigrant, aging, and homeless population, which results in clients signing contracts that they have no business signing. There's a need for attorneys who either speak Spanish, or have a good understanding of the community. Austin has two communities: one has wealth, and the other is people who live from paycheck to paycheck. Many of our clients at the clinics will have issues



that are the direct result of lack of money, lack of understanding of basic legal concepts, or inability to understand English. But then I guess that's true in most communities in Texas.

### **So you're able to assist with those types of cases?**

We do. It's not surprising at times to see partners of major law firms at the clinics doing the same pro bono work as I do. In Austin there are many lawyers who are at the top of the legal community—both in skill and reputation—that know there is a need to provide a voice for the poor, and they gladly do their part, be it by volunteering time or providing resources.

### **Tell me about a memorable case.**

Expungements and non-disclosure orders are what I most enjoy doing because they give people the ability to start life anew. I had a middle-aged client who was trying to apply for a job and when she came to the clinic that was her last chance at trying to keep her life together. She kept getting rejected for employment because of two or three arrests from when she was quite young that had all been dismissed, but they were negatively affecting her ability to find employment and housing. The cost of hiring an attorney to obtain an expungement was prohibitive for her. We filed her petition with the court costs waived and were successful in removing the arrests from her record and it did not cost her a single cent. She was extremely happy, as she was able to obtain a decent job and provide a home for her kids, thereby becoming a productive tax-paying citizen, not dependent on the state. And this is what pro bono work is all about—giving hope to individuals who have lost hope. **TBJ**