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## Celebrating a Lasting Legacy: Nitza Milagros Escalera

Leah A. Hill

*Associate Dean for Experiential Education and Clinical Associate Professor of Law, Family Law Clinic,  
Fordham University School of Law, eoe@law.fordham.edu*

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## NITZA MILAGROS ESCALERA\*

*Leah A. Hill\*\**

Nitza Milagros Escalera joined Fordham Law as the first Afro-Latina assistant dean for student affairs in 1994. She came to Fordham Law with superstar credentials: she holds a B.A. from LeMoyne College, an M.S. from Syracuse University, an M.P.A. from New York University, and a J.D. from Columbia University School of Law. Her passion for education was inspired by her mother, Francisca Escalera, who raised three daughters and returned to school when Dean Escalera was only ten years old. Dean Escalera watched in awe as her mother completed high school and college and obtained her nursing degree, earning high grades along the way. Dean Escalera's work history was equally impressive: she worked as a staff attorney with the New York City Commission on Human Rights, and as the director of health advocacy for the Community Service Society. Dean Escalera's legacy at Fordham Law extends beyond the borders of her stellar credentials. She served legions of students and faculty with integrity, compassion, and boundless energy for life.

Dean Escalera built the Office of Student Affairs from an army of one into an institution that would become the Law School's heartbeat. She started as a one-woman team with just a desk, a chair, and a telephone.

While she had an office of her own, she did not have any support staff. Her responsibilities seemed impossible: she supervised the registrar's office; handled student challenges, including disciplinary issues; provided academic support and enrichment programming; ran the Student Bar Association and student affinity groups; and she served as the lead event planner for graduation. And yet when all was said and done, Dean Escalera managed her workload with passion and gusto. She quickly built relationships with faculty, students, and administrators, and she earned a reputation as someone pleasant, accessible, and reliable.

By the time I came to Fordham Law in 1996, Dean Escalera had a solid reputation as someone to turn to for advice on all things related to students. She was known as someone who was responsive, kind, and reliable. She cared deeply about students, and she never hesitated to counsel faculty members seeking advice about student concerns. Dean Escalera helped

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\* Nitza Milagros Escalera served as assistant dean for student affairs at Fordham University School of Law from 1994 until her recent retirement. She was also appointed as Fordham Law's first-ever assistant dean of diversity initiatives in 2016.

\*\* Associate Dean for Experiential Education and Clinical Associate Professor of Law, Family Law Clinic, Fordham University School of Law. The text of this tribute has been lightly edited and footnoted. For an overview of the corresponding Tribute, see *Foreword: Celebrating a Lasting Legacy*, 89 FORDHAM L. REV. ONLINE 1 (2020).

faculty navigate student academic and personal challenges. Every faculty member knew: if a student is falling behind—call Dean Escalera; if a student has been missing class—call Dean Escalera; if you need to have a difficult conversation with a student—talk to Dean Escalera. She could make faculty from all walks of life feel comfortable coming to her, and she was universally well-liked and respected.

Dean Escalera was also a champion for diversity. She took over the Academic Enrichment Program (AEP), an initiative started by the late Judge Debbie Batts and the late Professor Terry Smith to help historically underrepresented students acclimate to law school and build community. Under her leadership, AEP expanded from a summer program for entering students to a program that extended throughout the first year of law school and beyond. Her sense of community and commitment to diversity did not end with her full-time responsibilities. She helped to connect faculty of color and built relationships that extended beyond the Law School's walls. I will forever be grateful to Dean Escalera for inviting me to lunch with faculty and administrators of color during my first few weeks at Fordham Law. During that lunch, I met Professor Smith, who would become an amazing mentor and friend. Dean Escalera continued to organize these diversity lunches with varying groups of faculty and administrators. A core group of us decided to create a tradition of celebratory lunches that would continue for years. We would celebrate birthdays and commemorate the end of the semester. Through these lunches, we found a sense of belonging and friendship.

Beyond the AEP, Dean Escalera helped to break down the walls between Fordham Law and the broader New York City community by creating and expanding legal pipeline programs. Under her leadership, the Law School provided access, exposure, and ultimately admission to countless historically underrepresented students from middle school through college. She created and made space for at least six different legal pipeline programs. It is no wonder she received the Council on Legal Education Opportunity EDGE Diversity Award in 2019.<sup>1</sup>

Dean Escalera worked to make sure that students' needs were front and center at the Law School. She recognized early that most of the academic enrichment and support focused on students in their first year of law school. She oversaw the creation of a tutoring program for students who were struggling, created a bar preparation program, and expanded academic enrichment for upper-level students. She worked closely with student groups and helped them with everything from managing their budgets to planning events and mediating disputes. She created wellness programs including weekly yoga classes for students. She attended countless student events to show her support, and she mentored hundreds of students throughout the

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1. See *CLEO Announces CLEO EDGE Award Honorees for Education, Diversity, and Greater Equality*, COUNCIL ON LEGAL EDUC. OPPORTUNITY (Sept. 16, 2019), <https://cleoinc.org/cleo-announces-cleo-edge-award-honorees-for-education-diversity-and-greater-equality/> [<https://perma.cc/Z4GQ-E5SH>].

years. These words from Vivian Huelgo, a '97 graduate, exemplify the kind of impact "Dean Nitza" has had:

As a 1L in 1994, I was weighed down by insecurity and wondering how I would ever find a home in the law. When Dean Nitza introduced a speaker from a legal justice fund who talked about working on Latina rights, I followed up with Dean Nitza and asked if she could help me connect with this speaker. Dean Nitza not only made the connection but helped me secure my first summer internship. Dean Nitza continued to serve as my mentor, coach, guide and wise Latina advisor throughout every internship and every position. [She] [n]ever falter[ed] in her encouragement and belief that the law could be my home if I wanted and furthermore that I would succeed. She believed in me before I did! I am forever grateful. My tribute to her has been to try to mentor and coach others.<sup>2</sup>

There isn't enough space on these pages to recognize all that Dean Escalera has meant to Fordham Law. Her work ethic is unparalleled, but she will also be remembered for her infectious laughter, her commitment to peace<sup>3</sup>, and her unflappable integrity. To paraphrase the words of the Honorable Sonia Sotomayor, Dean Escalera's legacy is "an ember" that will "blaze forever."<sup>4</sup>

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2. Email from Vivian Huelgo, Chief Couns., Comm'n on Domestic & Sexual Violence, Am. Bar Ass'n, to Leah A. Hill, Assoc. Dean for Experiential Educ. & Clinical Assoc. Professor of Law, Fordham Univ. Sch. of L. (Oct. 12, 2020, 8:52 A.M.) (on file with author).

3. Inspired by the turmoil that enveloped the country following the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, Dean Escalera obtained a master's degree in peace education from Columbia University and is a founder and member of the board of directors of Friends of PASOS: A Museum and Center for Peacebuilding, Inc.

4. Justice Sonia Sotomayor once said in a speech, "The Latina in me is an ember that blazes forever." Jolie Lee, *Sotomayor Said It: Notable Quotes from Supreme Court's 1st Latina Justice*, USA TODAY (Aug. 8, 2014 3:00 PM), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2014/08/08/sonia-sotomayor-supreme-court-five-years/13715203/> [<https://perma.cc/D2HH-PVVS>].