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COVER STORY

Summer associate was once her boss' pro bono asylum case

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At first glance, Camila Piedrahita appears to be the archetypal summer associate.

After finishing her first year at UC Berkeley School of Law, Piedrahita took a position with Robins Kaplan LLP, where partner David Martinez is one of several mentors.

But Piedrahita's story, and her relationship to Martinez, is unique. They met when she was just 8, sitting in the back of a courtroom watching Martinez argue passionately that she and her family should be granted asylum.

"For me, that was the first time I realized, 'Oh, this is why we packed up and got out of town,'" Piedrahita said, reflecting on her memories in the courtroom. "Sitting there was the first time that I realized the gravity of the situation."

Piedrahita was born in Bogotá, Colombia. Her father was a civil engineer and her mother was a nurse. For years, the family lived in harmony, avoiding to some degree the harsh realities of the decades-old civil war that ravaged the country.

"We had a family, my brother and I were going to great schools," Piedrahita said of her life in Colombia. "There was no reason for us to leave."

That ease and comfort evaporated the day Piedrahita's father went missing.

Working to destabilize the government, guerrillas were determined to stifle any attempt to improve the country's infrastructure.

In a practice known as "pesca milagrosa," which translates literally as "the miraculous catch" — a reference to the miracles of Jesus — guerrillas would stop buses, round up passengers, and force them to hand over their personal effects. With that information, the guerrillas would target passengers whom they surmised would be profitable extortion targets.

"He was a road engineer, he was a civil engineer, and he was basically a clear target," Martinez said of Piedrahita's father.

Contracting with the Colombian government to construct a major roadway, he was indeed an ideal target for



Alexander Drecun / Special to the Daily Journal

From left, David Martinez, partner at Robins Kaplan LLP, and summer associate Camila Piedrahita, who is pursuing a career in law 15 years after Martinez helped her and her family obtain asylum in the United States.

the guerrillas. After stopping a bus on which he was a passenger, guerrillas took him into the jungle and held him for four days.

They attempted to negotiate with his employer, demanding a ransom for his release. The company, which had a policy to not negotiate with rebels, refused.

The guerrillas turned to Piedrahita's family for money. After a payment plan was negotiated, he was released.

Piedrahita's parents knew they were no longer safe and fled to Los Angeles, where they had relatives.

In 2003, the family petitioned for asylum.

The case was referred to Robins Kaplan through a public interest law firm. Martinez, an immigrant from Spain, dedicated much of his pro bono practice to asylum petitions. He took the family's case.

Hoping to make it airtight, Martinez substantiated as much as he could with documentation. He had maps made of the road on which Piedrahita's father was working, a Colombian newspaper article reporting his kidnapping, copies of his diploma, and documents establishing he was working on the road.

"Camila's parents were clearly motivated by fear," he said. "You don't just pick up and take your family to a

foreign country and leave everything else behind unless there's a powerful motivation to do so."

Nonetheless, the government challenged the petition, disputing Martinez's evidence and, according to Martinez, putting up none of its own, which he called a "knee-jerk reaction."

Martinez's argument that the guerrillas imputed a political position to Piedrahita's father was successful. The judge granted the petition, finding her father to be a political refugee.

Despite the legal recognition, life in the United States was far from perfect for the Piedrahitas.

Her father was unable to work as an engineer and parked cars for a living, making little money, and the family was unable to return to Colombia to visit for many years.

Piedrahita's father imparted to her a drive to finish her education. She persevered through high school, graduating from UCLA with a double major in political science and sociology then earning a spot at one of the nation's most selective law schools.

Piedrahita's memory of court remained with her throughout. The zeal with which Martinez fought her case stuck with her.

"It sounds strange, but when people

ask me, 'When did you know you wanted to go to law school?' I always say, I was 8," she said. "That was it for me."

The family kept in touch with Martinez for several years after their petition but eventually lost touch.

In December, after class one day, Piedrahita's thoughts drifted to her family's story. Halfway through her first year of law school, she decided it was time to thank Martinez for everything he had done and to tell him she followed in his footsteps. It was a shot in the dark. She didn't know if Martinez would remember her.

"I got the email. She wrote, 'You may not remember me ...' Of course I remember you!" Martinez said, emphatically slapping the table. "I was very happy to hear about Camila's and her family's accomplishments over the last 13 years. It was really a great feeling."

The two had lunch and Camila told him how her life had unfolded — telling him stories of helping her parents fill out citizenship forms and how she had gone on to graduate as valedictorian of her high school.

"It was awesome to hear the story and to hear how well her family has done, that they have lived the American dream," he said. "All the sacrifices her family have made have paid in spades."

Within months, they made arrangements for Piedrahita to spend her first summer in law school at Robins Kaplan.

Piedrahita is still unsure of what exactly she wants to do once she is out of school, but hopes that her summer at the firm will help her decipher what type of law she will practice. Wherever she ends up, Piedrahita said that she will make sure to incorporate asylum work into her pro bono practice.

Piedrahita is part of an asylum representation clinic at Berkeley. Before she left school, she was involved in an asylum case for a woman in Guatemala, doing work similar to the work Martinez did for her family.

"It's been incredible," she said of the experience. "That's definitely something that, regardless of where I end up, regardless of what area I practice, I want that to be a part of my life."