



## Woman of the Law

**Virginia Perez, Westchester County Legislator for District 17, reveals how a family tragedy led to a career helping others.**

BY DANNY MCCARTHY



PHOTOS BY STEFAN RADTKE

When half of the roof of Virginia Perez's three-family Yonkers home caved in during a particularly rainy summer, she hired a handyman to help her move some supplies up to the top of the house before clambering up there herself.

"After doing some research, the cheapest quote that I got was about \$4,000, and I

didn't have that money," the current Westchester County Legislator for District 17 says. "So what I did was I got one of my handy guys to look at the damage and give me a list of things that I needed to fix it myself. I went to Home Depot and got everything. It took about a week, but I did it."

At just 25, Perez had purchased the three-family home completely empty. She refurbished it herself, gave out applications, brought in potential buyers, and performed background checks. "I didn't have anybody to show me the ropes, so I learned. I went along with the good, the bad, and the ugly of being a landlord. And at such a young age, it was crazy because people didn't believe that it was my building. I looked like a child!"

Her grit kept her from giving up. "I spent many nights in the boiler room, cleaning it out and restarting it," she says. One of Legislator Perez's trademarks has always been taking matters into her own hands. Ten years ago, when her brother was killed in a tragic crime, she lobbied the Senate as a private citizen. When the 2007 Hurricane Noel hit the Dominican Republic, where Perez emigrated from at the age of 10, she mobilized her community, collecting and shipping supplies.

Perez, her brother, and their parents emigrated from the Dominican Republic in the late '80s to the very district Perez would later work as a representative. "I moved here directly to my district, to southwest Yonkers," laughs Perez. "So I've been living in my district for close to 30 years now."



The combination of the move and their small unit solidified strong family bonds. "Our parents got jobs right away, factory jobs; they worked different shifts; my father worked nights and my mother worked days," she says glowingly of her parents and their sacrifices. "We had to learn a new language, a new culture. [Our parents] wanted to introduce us to new opportunities."

Perez and her brother attended Yonkers public schools and, while at Saunders Trades and Technical High School, Perez went to a college fair and discovered the hospitality field. Intrigued, she researched it more and found a program at Monroe Community College that fit her parameters: It was close to home and would allow her to graduate with no debt. Still a student, Perez snagged an internship at famed The Plaza Hotel, competing alongside other students for one position.

"I got hired in two weeks," Perez said. "I remember one of the students from Cornell laughing, saying, "Do you think you're going to get this job over me?" because I was coming from community college. In the end, I got the job before they did." After getting degrees in hospitality and business management, Perez worked at The Plaza before moving on to Le Méridien, Sheraton, and Radisson.

In 2007, Perez's brother Martin was shot and killed in a Yonkers apartment complex while delivering food from the Emerald Diner, leaving behind a 7-month-old daughter, his fiancée, and his family. It was one wound Legislator Perez could not repair. "I'm Mrs. Fix-It in the family," she says. "Being the oldest, everyone always comes to me for answers and to fix something. So when the tragedy happened in my family, I felt terrible because it was the one thing I couldn't fix. You can't undo a loved one's death. December 17 was the 10-year anniversary of his death, and it still feels like it was yesterday. He was 25 at the time."

The senselessness of her brother's passing spurred Perez into action as a private citizen. She started a community watch, called "Help Put Yonkers on the MAP," and lobbied the Senate to implement "Martin's Law."

"It's a public-safety bill to protect residents and landlords themselves, to protect them from lawsuits," says Perez. Eventually, frustrated with the stagnation of the bill, Perez decided to get into government. Her first run for public office ended in defeat — and mystery: She came within eight votes of winning a seat on the city council. After some investigating, it was discovered that her opponent's election lawyer was arrested on voter fraud charges, pleading guilty. Disenchanted, Perez walked away.

“So I went away for a little while, got my thoughts together, came back to work and came back with a vengeance,” shares Perez. “I went backpacking for a little while.”

A backpacker since she was 18, Perez has traveled the world on a shoestring budget, making her way through Mexico, across Africa, and to Asia and Europe. “I save money all year-round, and I do research, and I buy cheap tickets, and I stay in hostels, and I go hitchhiking; that’s the way I got to explore the world, 20 bucks a day.”



After clearing her head, Perez decided to try running for office again facing a 10-year incumbent. “I was doing this in memory of my brother, and I still do it in memory of my brother, so I ran for the seat I currently hold.”

Over her tenure as the District 17 legislator, Perez has gained a reputation as a political renegade for her willingness to work across the aisle. “Apparently I’m a very polarizing person; people either love me or hate me. But that’s what comes with the territory, and that’s what comes with being an independent thinker,” Perez says bluntly. “I am a Democrat, but I am a fiscally conservative Democrat, and my constituents know that. Being bipartisan is very important; you can’t have it all in one direction. And this is how we get work done; there’s nothing wrong with reaching across the aisle when the time calls for it.”

Despite being challenged at every election, Perez has maintained a strong presence in her community and remains eager to give back. As for future political endeavors, Perez remains cagey. “I just got re-elected, so my constituents sent me back for a fourth term. So I’m very excited for that, excited to serve them again in this capacity,” she says. “I really love what I do. Should they ask me to represent them in another capacity, I’ll answer the call.”

But before that and her tropical retirement plans, Perez has work to do with her current term. “One of the main things I’m working on is this public-safety bill, Martin’s Law, for people in my community, as well, because I’m not the only one who’s lost a loved one to violence.” She also aims to kick-start a healthy-living initiative and bring more college fairs to schools in the area. “It was at a college fair that I found out what I loved,” Perez recalls. “I’m hoping to give to another group of kids, the same opportunities that were given to me.”

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