

Facing Down Challenges

For Judge Candice Alcaraz, Her Mother's Guidance in Childhood Laid Her Path to a History-Making Position

By Lindsay Thompson

When the **Hon. Candice Alcaraz, '16**, was sworn in as Wyandotte County district judge for Division 12 on Jan. 9, 2023, it was a historic event. She is the first Black female judge ever elected in Wyandotte County. The 32-year-old Alcaraz believes she may also be the county's youngest judge ever seated. Her win undoubtedly speaks to the ways her campaign resonated with voters. But her decisive 68.8% win over her incumbent opponent is also the result of two key principles Alcaraz's mother ingrained in her at an early age.

"My mother, bless her, she was thinking further ahead than I was," Alcaraz said. "She had the plan for me from the beginning. She said, 'Prove yourself in the classroom and pair that with a love and care for the community. Do that, and there is no way you can fail.'"

Alcaraz took her mother's words to heart. Even as a child, she was serious about achievement and overcoming obstacles.

She has kept all her childhood report cards and in them she can map how she grew into the position she holds today. One card included a note to her mother from the teacher. It said Alcaraz was a great student, but when she struggled with a subject, she was very hard on herself. What Alcaraz sees in that message is her deeply rooted personal expectations and drive to achieve.

"I've never really thought I'm competing against other people," Alcaraz said. "I'm competing against myself. I want the best from myself. I want to be my best self at all times."

During her studies at Washburn University School of Law, Alcaraz found faculty who helped her hone this work ethic. One professor who deeply impacted her was Alex Glashausser. She respected his depth of knowledge and the way he kept his students on their toes.

Her first course with Glashausser was torts. It was challenging for her, and she didn't earn as high a grade as she would have liked. When she took his course on remedies, she was determined that this time she would show him what she could achieve.

"I pushed myself," Alcaraz said. "I was answering questions in class. I was going to his study hours. I was going to prove to him I can do this because he believed in me."

She made an A in the class.

Washburn also challenged her to step out of her comfort zone. Uncertain of where she wanted to go with the law, she



Hon. Candice Alcaraz, '16. Photo submitted

was feeling stuck and directionless. Oral arguments were approaching, and she was petrified. Even as she walked up to the podium, dropping her papers on the way, her sense of dread was enormous. And then, to her shock, something took hold of her. She harnessed her nerves and knocked it out of the park.

Her professor at the time, Jeffrey Jackson, BBA '89, JD '92, now interim dean of the Law School and then director of the center for excellence in Advocacy, encouraged her to recognize her talent for oration and develop it.

"It was an amazing experience I still carry with me to this day. He let me know I did what I was supposed to do, and I was good at it," said Alcaraz. "I needed that. It was the

encouragement I needed to push me through to the end and get me on to the next destination.”

This experience made her realize that she wanted to be in the courtroom every day.

After graduation, Alcaraz went to work as an assistant district attorney for Wyandotte County. In the beginning, she wrestled with her nervousness, and she questioned if she was on the right path. She kept diligently working on her skills, but she didn't feel certain she truly had what it took.

The answer to these doubts came from a particularly harrowing challenge. She was on call when a triple homicide was called in. She showed up on the scene and found she instantly shifted into gear, evaluating what was needed and taking action.

“This was the first time I was going to see deceased bodies,” Alcaraz said. “I walked into the house, waiting for something to wash over me and give me an excuse to say, ‘This is not for me.’ And it never did. I walked in, took it in, and said, ‘All right, let's get to work.’”

After that, her confidence grew. She started to do more hearings and took on as much work as she possibly could. Following her inner compass, she worked hard to always surpass her previous best efforts. Before long, she was taking on high-profile cases.

Her work in the district attorney's office provided her many professional challenges and growth opportunities like these, but it also sparked a personal quandary. She was bothered by the fact that Wyandotte County lacked diverse representation in its judges. Over time, she was also dismayed by how one judge, her eventual opponent, managed his courtroom. Before long, she began to feel an internal pressure to do more than simply hope for change.

“Something in my gut said, ‘You don't have to wait for anything,’” Alcaraz said. “I told myself you can do something about it. You're always trying to be one of those people that says, ‘Don't just talk about it, be it.’ This is something you can do.”

With encouragement from her fiancé, she decided it was important to seize the moment and throw her hat in the ring.

When she pressed the button on her phone to post her campaign announcement, she was again overcome by nerves. She described the moment as the scariest in her life. But the flutter of anxiousness was quickly surpassed by her resolve to give this latest challenge her all, as she had many times before.

She built a campaign centered around a commitment to being visible to, and transparent with, the community. In an age where few people know who their elected judges are, she conducted a door-knocking campaign.

“I didn't care if it was raining, snowing, if it was 100 degrees outside,” Alcaraz said. “I was knocking on doors every single

day, as often as I could. And the people responded to me very well. Even people who didn't necessarily agree with me. By the end of our conversation, they had a newfound respect for me. They were equally surprised and proud that I was coming to talk to them, to see how they felt about certain issues and tell them who I am and what I bring to the table.”

What she brought to the table was both fresh ideas and an adherence to time-honored principles.

Her time in the district attorney's office had shown her what the community needed from the court system and what she could offer. She was concerned that most convicted defendants were back in the community in a short amount of time. She recognized the need for the courts to be informed of, and to consider, the range of programs available to defendants when considering sentencing so they could have the best chance of re-entering society prepared to take a different path.

“As a prosecutor, there were some people for whom I was literally their career prosecutor,” Alcaraz said.

“I would see them from the time they were juveniles through the time they were early adults. I thought, ‘How do I make sure that the community is assured that they're safe and that this person can come back into it positively?’ The goal should be, if possible, to get them through community programming, get them doing some community service so that they can give back something good to the community that they've harmed.”

Alcaraz has also centered her work on the basic principle that everyone deserves respect and deserves their day in court. Win or lose, she wants people to feel they have had their opportunity to be heard.

She is seeing the value of applying both approaches in her work on the bench, even in the civil cases she handles. For Alcaraz, every case is an opportunity for her to do better than before.

“I preached about respecting people and doing things differently in the courtroom, and I'm practicing what I preach on a daily basis,” Alcaraz said. “I'm seeing what I can do with my time here because I won't be in this courtroom forever. But if there is something, some change that I can affect while I'm here, I can feel good about that. I can rest peacefully at night.”

Alcaraz has many years ahead of her to effect change. Although the future is unwritten, it seems certain she will always approach it with the mindset she's carried with her throughout her life.

“It has been the same plan since I was a child,” Alcaraz said. “Just continue to prove yourself, but always keep in mind you have those two bases. You have your knowledge, but you also must have the care that goes with it. Those two things have led me to a solid career and put me on this path.”