

Borough Welcomes New Appellate Judge Luis Gonzalez



PHOTO: JOSÉ GRISALES

ANITA SPEARMAN

Bronx Journal Staff Reporter

Last Spring, the Bronx Supreme Courthouse, near Yankee Stadium was abuzz with activity as Justice Luis A. Gonzalez was sworn in to the Appellate Division, First Department.

The First Department hears appeals on decisions from lower courts in Manhattan and the Bronx, and the justices who sit on it are appointed by the governor.

As a result of the appointment, Gonzalez now holds the second highest ranking post of any Hispanic in the New York State court system.

Dignitaries in attendance included Governor George Pataki, who swore Justice Gonzalez into his new office. Also present were the Honorable Jonathan Lippman, Chief Administrative Judge of the Courts of State of the New York; the Honorable Milton L. Williams, the Presiding Justice of the Appellate Division, First Department; and New York State Senator Olga Mendez, who represents the 28th Senatorial District. The room was also filled with well-wishers including judges, court officers, law clerks and attorneys, and 35 members of the general public.

Many members of the audience expressed praise and admiration for Gonzalez and his

work in the courts. Governor Pataki spoke highly of Gonzalez calling him a devoted public servant and deserving of his promotion.

The Governor was well-received by the audience as he joked about attending a Yankee game later that afternoon, and then spoke of the bravery of the Police and Fire Departments of New York City during the September 11th crisis.

Justice Gonzalez, although very pleased about his promotion, says he enjoyed his previous post as Administrative Justice of the Supreme Court, Bronx County as well. A Bronx resident for over 23 years, Justice Gonzalez' positions took him between Manhattan to Bronx throughout his 17-year-long judicial career. He was responsible for many administrative duties, which included personnel matters concerning judges and case assignment.

Before becoming Administrative Justice, he sat as a Justice of the New York Supreme court and heard civil cases on a daily basis.

Justice Gonzalez presided over the notable case of *Robinson v. Bosch Manufacturing Co.*, a product-liability case which yielded a verdict of \$38 Million. He said that he remembered feeling badly for

the plaintiff's family because the plaintiff, Robinson, was left in a vegetative state, but that he was glad that they won the trial. He said that the case one of the most difficult to preside over.

"Of course, I will miss the people most," Justice Gonzalez said of his old job. "I've been around this courthouse for fifteen years. I have a lot of friends; there are a lot of good people in this courthouse."

His new duties will be very different from his previous ones. Sitting for the Appellate Division, located at Madison Avenue and 25th Street, Justice Gonzalez will hear and review cases from lower courts. He will then decide if the lower court followed the examples of previous cases in reaching its verdict. The Appellate Division, which includes the Surrogate's Court and the Court of Claims, has four departments which hear appeals from specific counties. The First Department covers Manhattan and the Bronx courts. Appellate Division Justices earn a salary of approximately \$145,000.

By way of background, Justice Gonzalez moved to New York from Puerto Rico as a young boy. After growing up in the Hell's Kitchen section of Manhattan, he attended Eastern Mennonite University in

Harrisburg, Virginia. After graduation, he continued his studies at Columbia University's School of Law where he earned his degree in 1975.

After the swearing-in, the applause was long and loud. When it died down, Justice Gonzalez spoke to the crowd. He thanked many people, individually, for their friendship and support over the years. As spectators dispersed toward the buffet table, a steady stream of friends and supporters moved toward the podium to offer their congratulations.

Gov. Pataki exited quickly surrounded by bodyguards who led him to a waiting limousine. Security was more relaxed after he left. Justice Gonzalez made plenty of friends in the 15 years that he has been a judge in the Bronx courthouse. The handshaking lasted almost an hour.

"I went into law because when I was in school, there weren't many minority attorneys around," Justice Gonzalez said. "I wanted to help change that, make a difference." He will have another opportunity to do just that sitting on the Appellate Division, where decisions of law are made everyday. "I see the Appellate Court Justices like engineers of society. We make sure that the law is applied properly".