

First Latina Justice Patricia Guerrero Affirmed to California Supreme Court

Guerrero succeeds Justice Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar, who left the court in October.

By Meghann M. Cuniff

The Commission on Judicial Appointments on Tuesday unanimously approved state appellate Justice Patricia Guerrero for a seat on the California Supreme Court, making her the first Hispanic woman appointed to the state's highest court.

The commission heard from several of Guerrero's current and former colleagues during the 45-minute meeting, including Latham & Watkins partner Robert Howard, chair of the firm's environment, land and resources department in San Diego.

Howard worked closely with Guerrero for more than 10 years in neighboring offices, sharing the same legal secretary and working the same cases. He described her on Tuesday as brilliant, and said a former U.S. attorney in San Diego "calls her to this day one of the best legal writers he has ever seen."

"And I totally agree," Howard said.

Guerrero excelled at the "most demanding matters," and Howard said he brought his 15-year-old son and 10-year-old daughter to Tuesday's hearing in San Francisco so they could see what's possible through hard work and good character.

"Kids, this is what's possible," said Howard, turning to his children.

Guerrero, 50, is a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley and Stanford Law School. She was an assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District of California from 2002 to 2003, and she became a partner at Latham & Watkins in 2006. She was a San Diego County Superior Court judge from 2013 to 2017, including a year as supervising judge of the family law division, before being appointed to the Fourth



Courtesy photo

California Supreme Court Justice Patricia Guerrero at her confirmation hearing on March 22, 2022, in San Francisco.

District Court of Appeal, Division One, in San Diego.

Her father, Jorge, attended the hearing in San Francisco, as did her sister, Claudia, husband, Joe, and her 15-year-old son, Anthony. Her 14-year-old son, Christopher, watched remotely.

"In total, about two dozen family members and friends, including some who grew up with Justice Guerrero in the Imperial Valley, attended the hearing," according to a news release from the courts.

Judge Maureen Hallahan, the assistant presiding judge of San Diego County Superior

Court, spoke Tuesday of Guerrero's background as a "daughter of immigrants who was raised in a traditional Hispanic family in the Imperial Valley."

Guerrero started working at a grocery store when she was 16 and graduated as co-valedictorian in high school. Hallahan said Guerrero's parents instilled "the capacity to believe she could do anything" she wanted, and that "looking beyond oneself to the needs of others is just a way of life."

Judith McConnell, the administrative presiding justice of the Fourth District Court of Appeal, Division One, introduced her appellate court colleagues in the audience and said, "but for travel constraints, everyone would be here."

"We adore Justice Guerrero and we are sad to lose her, even though we understand this is important for the state of California," McConnell said. McConnell said people recognized Guerrero's star power early in her career, and "she has continued to be a star."

"She's one of those rare individuals who can work well with people of differing viewpoints

and is often able to craft an opinion where there had previously been disagreement," McConnell said.

McConnell also referenced Guerrero's work with the Judges in Classrooms civic education program, saying she's "known as someone who never says no to [an] invitation to work in a school."

Chief Justice Tani Gorre Cantil-Sakauye asked Guerrero, "why do you invest yourself in Justice McConnell and the Justice Council's civics education program?"

Guerrero said she loves the program and enjoys connecting with young students "so they can also see that really, they can do whatever they want."

"They don't have to be a lawyer or judge. They can follow their dreams," Guerrero said.

Guerrero said she's learned to appreciate how important it is to be collegial, to work with others and "to be open to their views." She said "like so many immigrant families" her parents "came here to work hard to seek opportunities and to give better lives to their children, so I am thankful for that."

"This is a story of the American dream, the belief that [with] hard work, perseverance and opportunities, anything is possible. And for that, I am thankful," Guerrero said.

Guerrero teared up as she thanked her mother, who died recently from breast cancer. "She taught us to be strong, compassionate and independent," Guerrero said. "She showed us the importance of family" and to "thank God for our blessings."

"She sacrificed everything for us," Guerrero continued, adding that she hopes her nomination "can serve as a tribute to her."

"I'm honored and deeply humbled by this opportunity. I am mindful of the solemn responsibility, and I commit to fulfilling and discharging those responsibilities," Guerrero said. "I promise to uphold the rule of law and to uphold values of this state and our country."

Guerrero succeeds Justice Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar, who left the court in October and is now the president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.