

## How I Made Partner: 'I Was Upfront About My Hopes and I Asked for Guidance and Advice,' Says Margarita O'Donnell Morales of Zuckerman Spaeder

**"The legal community flourishes when lawyers come from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences, and there are many ways in which your unique experience can be valuable in private practice."**

By Tasha Norman

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**Office:** Washington, D.C.

**Practice area:** Complex civil litigation and white collar criminal defense

**Law school and year of graduation:**  
New York University School of Law, 2009

**How long have you been at the firm and when did you make partner?** I have been at the firm for just over five years, since March 2016. I was an associate for four years before making partner in January 2020.

I had a unique path to private practice, which helped to pave the path to partner at Zuckerman Spaeder. I am Costa Rican American and grew up in various countries in Latin America, as well as in Europe and Southeast Asia. In law school, I knew I wanted to be a public defender and focused on making that goal a reality. After clerking for the Honorable Louis H. Pollak on the Eastern District of Pennsylvania and then for the Honorable Julio M. Fuentes on the Third Circuit, I was fortunate to land a job at the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia, a terrific and well-respected public defender office.

I represented hundreds of juvenile and adult clients in cases ranging from

misdemeanors to serious felonies. I tried numerous cases, was in court almost daily, spent hours every day with my clients, and learned from observing and working with dozens of fantastic lawyers. It was a challenging and rewarding job that allowed me to develop my identity and personality as a lawyer.

As a public defender, I was able to further develop my Spanish skills by representing Latino clients in criminal proceedings. At Zuckerman Spaeder, I have worked on a number of civil and criminal cases where these language and cross-cultural skills have been important, whether for understanding cultural issues that are at play or communicating with clients, witnesses or counsel in other countries. I also focus part of my pro bono practice on immigration issues. The legal community flourishes when lawyers come from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences, and there are many ways in which your unique experience can be valuable in private practice.

**What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming partner?** Though it shouldn't have been a surprise given the supportive environment at Zuckerman Spaeder, I couldn't believe what an immediate sense of welcome I had from my fellow partners. I truly felt like part of



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**Margarita K. O'Donnell Morales**

the family and a valued member of the partnership from day one. Zuckerman Spaeder is a very special place, with outstanding lawyers who are committed to excellence. As a partner, I have felt even greater investment in the success of the firm and the happiness of those who work here, the latter of which has been particularly important during the pandemic.

**What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner?** I think it was a combination of a number of tangible and intangible factors and my contributions to the firm over the course of several years. The foundation of making partner is doing excellent legal work, exercising strong judgment, and being a creative and informed advocate for your clients.

I have noticed that associates can be hesitant about vocalizing their long-term goals, including their interest in becoming a partner. Over the years, I was increasingly upfront about my hopes to make partner and I asked for guidance and advice. I encourage associates to find someone who can help them navigate these issues. It is important to be an advocate for yourself in a way that is genuine and collaborative. Being invested in your own professional development—seeking new opportunities, honing new skills, developing new relationships—is important if you want others to be invested in you.



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### What career advancement advice would you give to an associate?

As an associate, ask yourself what you can do to make a matter run more smoothly or to take

something off the partner's plate.

Set the goal of being an asset and the go-to person on every case that you are supporting. This can also allow you to develop a legal or factual expertise on a matter that could be indispensable down the line.

Also, think creatively about what you bring to the table that may allow you to develop business in a particular area or be a greater asset to your firm and your clients. For me, that is both my experience as a public defender and my cross-cultural background.

### Describe how you feel now about your career now that you've made partner.

Excited about the future and very happy. My career has taken several turns, and it has shown me that there is not one path to partnership and that legal careers are flexible. I am excited to see what I can



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accomplish in this next phase of my career and with the support of the firm.

### What's the key to successful business development?

This is often one of the most daunting aspects of being a young lawyer, as the idea of bringing in business can seem like a distant goal. When I first started at Zuckerman Spaeder, one of the firm's most senior partners noted that newer lawyers seem to prefer email over phone calls, but that in his experience, personal contact had been a significant part of developing connections in the industry. I have taken to heart the need for personal contact and I think it is critical for developing potential business contacts. Based on his advice, I began picking up the phone more regularly and connecting with lawyers on my cases on a more personal basis.

When you're an associate, this may mean finding an associate in your joint defense group and calling them to discuss various issues instead of relying on email. The need for that personal connection is even more important during the pandemic, and I have been able to nurture several contacts during the last year simply by picking up the phone more often.

### What's been the biggest change, day-to-day, in your routine since becoming

**partner?** I have become more involved in firm management and decisions about the firm's future. Most recently, I was asked to lead Zuckerman Spaeder's substantial pro bono program along with my partner Steve Herman. This is an honor and an exciting opportunity to think about how lawyers can serve others in this changing world. But more practically, this role is giving me great insight into matters of firm management.

### Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to partner?

I was fortunate to have several mentors at Zuckerman Spaeder, each of whom played a different role in helping me develop as a lawyer and ultimately become partner. These mentors include Blair Brown, an extraordinary litigator and also a former public defender, who was instrumental in helping me transition to private practice and guiding me through the partnership process. Our managing partner, Dwight Bostwick, encouraged me to think about firm management and big picture issues. Jon Fetterolf, who heads our sports practice, believed in me from the very beginning and gave me key opportunities to develop substantive skills. Kate Duval, who specializes in congressional investigations, has provided invaluable mentorship and been a role model.