

Roger Williams University

DOCS@RWU

Life of the Law School (1993-)

Archives & Law School History

5-20-2020

Law School News: Distinguished Service Professor: Deborah Gonzalez 05-20-2020

Michael M. Bowden

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.rwu.edu/law_archives_life



Part of the [Civil Rights and Discrimination Commons](#), [Constitutional Law Commons](#), [Immigration Law Commons](#), [Law and Society Commons](#), [Legal Education Commons](#), [Legal Profession Commons](#), and the [State and Local Government Law Commons](#)

May 20, 2020

Law School News

Distinguished Service Professor: Deborah Gonzalez

A longtime immigrant advocate and increasingly visible media commentator, this RWU Law alumna has dedicated her life and career to helping some of America's neediest, most vulnerable communities.

May 20, 2020
Michael M. Bowden



Roger Williams University School of Law is proud to announce that Deborah Gonzalez – director of the Immigration Law Clinic and Associate Clinical Professor of Law – will serve as the Bruce I. Kogan Distinguished Service Professor. The two-year appointment is effective July 1, 2020 and runs through June 30, 2022.

“It is impossible for me to describe in any detail the many ways in which Debbie has gone above and beyond to make valuable contributions to the community, many of which have had a direct

and meaningful impact on disadvantaged people with profound needs,” said Dean Michael J. Yelnosky.

Professor Gonzalez, who graduated from RWU Law in 2007, said the honor came as a welcome surprise.

“I was taken aback,” she said. “I’m so lucky to be able to do all this work and I’m looking forward to continuing so long as I can.”

Long Track Record

Gonzalez became the director of RWU Law’s Immigration Clinic after eight years in private immigration law practice. During those years, she founded an organization to assist recent immigrants from Brazil and Portugal adjust to life in the United States.

“Even before becoming our clinic director, Debbie was recognized for her community service,” Dean Yelnosky noted, adding that this long professional track record was a large consideration when she was selected to receive the inaugural RWU Law Alumni Champion for Justice Award in 2015.

“She was also on the board of Rhode Island Latino Dollars for Scholars; she served as Sub-Committee Chair of Welcoming Rhode Island, a project of the Dorcas International Institute; and she established herself as a willing and able cooperating attorney with our own Pro Bono Collaborative,” Yelnosky added.

In the latter role, Gonzalez led an RWU Law Alternative Spring Break trip in 2015 to an ICE detention facility in Karnes, Texas. While there, she supervised three RWU Law students who provided legal services to detained mothers who had travelled with their children to the United States to escape domestic violence, rape, extortion, and extreme poverty in Central America.

Immigrant Advocate

Since joining RWU Law’s faculty, her work in the community has only increased. She was a lead author of a white paper for Governor Raimondo regarding the granting of driver’s licenses to undocumented Rhode Islanders. She has given countless ‘Know Your Rights’ presentations across the state, including inside the Wyatt Detention Center in Central Falls, R.I. She has participated in training dozens of lawyers and non-lawyers on ways to assist undocumented immigrants. She has also continued to represent numerous individuals pro bono in immigration cases aside from her work in the clinic, through both the PBC and the Rhode Island Immigrant Coalition, of which she is a member. She has also supported the legislative lobbying efforts of the Rhode Island Chapter of the ACLU and the Rhode Island Center for Justice.

“I’m most proud of the work that I have done with the Immigrant Coalition,” Gonzalez said. “We were able to raise \$150,000, with the help of Governor Raimondo’s office, to pay for filing fees for DACA recipients back in 2017-2018. In 2018, we worked with former State Rep. and former RWU student, Shelby Maldonado to ensure that DACA recipients were able to renew

their driver's licenses even if their DACA status could not be renewed. The bill passed and was signed into law by Governor Raimondo.”

Soon after the DACA funding came along, the Coalition was able to secure \$250K for funding through the Rhode Island Foundation to hire an attorney for the Immigrant Coalition – an RWU Law alumna, Karina Valencia '14 – and hire a coordinator to keep the Coalition's business in order.

“Through my work at the Coalition, I was able to continue my community outreach at Wyatt Detention Facility by having my law students do individual consultations with Immigration detainees,” Gonzalez noted.

She has also become a frequently seen media commentator on immigration issues.

'Go-To' Immigration Expert

“When President Trump burst on the scene and began to implement his immigration law agenda, Debbie became a go-to person for individuals and organizations, including media outlets, for analysis of the legal changes made by the administration and the legality of those changes,” Yelnosky said. “She was regularly quoted in the print media, and she became a regular on local television and radio.”

Debbie has received a Community Champion Award from Latino Public Radio, and an award for her commitment to immigrant communities in Rhode Island from the Refugee Dream Center of Rhode Island. Last fall, she was [honored as a “Newsmaker” by Rhode Island Lawyer’s Weekly](#).

Just this spring, working together with RWU Law Professor Jared Goldstein and the ACLU of Rhode Island, she [successfully sued the Wyatt Detention Center](#) on behalf of three detainees who argued that the risks of contracting Covid-19 inside the Wyatt violated their due process rights. In April, a federal judge in Rhode Island ordered their release. And she's not finished yet.

“Just last Friday [May 15, 2020], Jared, the ACLU, the law firm of Morgan Lewis and I filed [a class action lawsuit against Wyatt and ICE to release all detainees](#) due to Wyatt and ICE's deliberate indifference and unconstitutional confinement of the detainees, which places the detainees at risk of contracting COVID-19,” Gonzalez said. “I'm very excited to be part of this lawsuit and to help these detainees in any way I can.”

Gonzalez notes that she could not have done any of this work alone.

“No one lives in a bubble,” she said. “I have had lots of help from the members of the Coalition, as well as the support of RWU Law faculty and staff such as Eliza Vorenberg, Suzy Harrington-Steppen, Laurie Barron, and Andy Horwitz, as well as RWU partners such as Jennifer Wood at the Center for Justice, and Cecily Ziegler and Carl Krueger at Dorcas International. I'm so fortunate to be able to do all this work with the support of RWU Law and our partners. Knowing that I have the law school's support and encouragement, I can continue doing this work.”

