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A Grand Leap: Julio M. Fuentes '75 Takes the Federal Bench—In a Big Way

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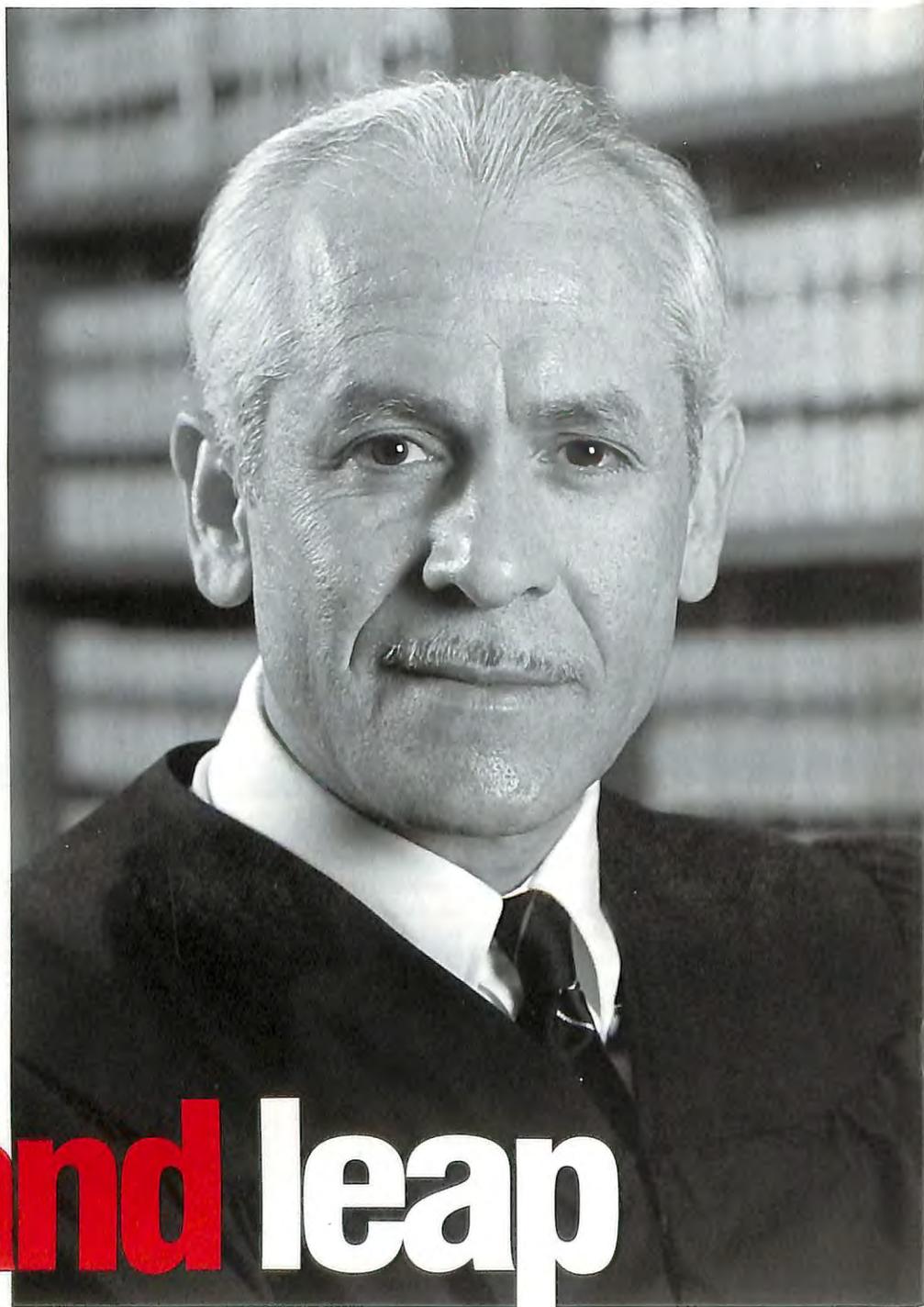
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Alumni Profiles:

**Julio M.
Fuentes**
'75

*takes the
federal
bench—
in a big
way*



A grand leap

A

road of legal scholarship and practice that began at UB Law School has led

Julio M. Fuentes '75 to the second-highest court in the nation.

Fuentes' appointment by President Clinton to the United States Court of Appeals,

3rd Circuit, was confirmed in March by a 93-0 vote in the U.S. Senate. The approval

came a year, almost to the day, after his nomination – a relatively speedy trip through the notoriously laggard federal approval process.

With his confirmation, Fuentes becomes UB Law's highest-ranking federal jurist.

"They are very concerned about what you bring to the federal bench," Fuentes says of the scrutiny by senators and the White House staff. "They look at your entire record as an attorney and your judicial record."

Obviously they were impressed by what they saw. Fuentes had been a judge on New Jersey's Superior Court bench in Essex County since 1987, having served on the court's Family, Criminal, Civil, Chancery and General Equity divisions. Before becoming a Superior Court judge, he was a municipal court judge from 1978 to 1987. Previous to that, he practiced civil and criminal law in the firm of Fuentes, Plant & Velazquez, in Jersey City, N.J.

The nomination to the Court of Appeals was somewhat of a happy surprise, Fuentes says. "I was originally recommended for U.S. District Court," he says, "and in process of reviewing my candidacy, the White House changed that to the Court of Appeals."

A soft-spoken and thoughtful jurist, Fuentes says, "I never, ever thought I would become a judge, certainly not in law school. But the legal education I re-

"I was in court every day with this small firm of seven lawyers, doing literally almost every kind of case that walked in the door. I handled it well, I think, because of the education I got in Buffalo. And because of that training, I did not hesitate to become a municipal judge. I was sitting in court during these cases, and deciding them before the judge did. I realized then that I could do that, too."

Fuentes started at UB Law when the school was in transition from its downtown site to the Amherst campus. "It was quite a distance," he says. "It was like a wilderness in Amherst. I felt very isolated sometimes, but it was a wonderful experience nevertheless. There was a lot of learning going on."

"Years and years later, you still remember what you learned in law school. You apply those principles, and as you apply them you are thinking, this is what I learned in law school."

The transition from lawyer to judge is one of focus, Fuentes says: "As a lawyer, you are an advocate, a proponent of a particular viewpoint. You have loyalty to your client and his case. As a judge, you have loyalty to the judicial system and the notion of justice. Your approach is obviously very different. You have to weigh the merits of the issues presented to you.

have to keep up with. Fortunately, I have a lot of help; I have four law clerks.

"And it is much different not only because it is appellate work, but because the body of law is different – it is federal law. So my learning curve is fairly steep. You have to be prepared before you hear oral arguments. My clerks write bench memoranda that help me to understand the issues being presented."

The 3rd Circuit encompasses New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania and the Virgin Islands, so Fuentes works not only in the Newark federal courthouse, but also in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and the islands.

Born and reared in Puerto Rico, Fuentes grew up in Toms River, N.J., where his mother, a single parent, worked as a practical nurse. After high school, Fuentes joined the military, serving as a lieutenant with the military police of the U.S. Army's Special Forces Group in Panama, from 1966 to 1969. Later, his undergraduate work was at Southern Illinois University. After law school, he also completed master's degrees in Latin American affairs at New York University and in liberal arts at Rutgers University.

The judge is conscious of another aspect of his appointment: the fact that it is cause for celebration in the Hispanic community. He is the first person of Hispanic origin to sit on the 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals.

But, he says, "I do not look at it as being a Hispanic judge. I am honored in the sense of being a Hispanic on the court. I look at myself as a judge in the Circuit Court of Appeals with a

very, very big caseload. I am also honored to be on the Court of Appeals as a Latino because I think it is important that the Latino community have representation at all levels of the judiciary. And to the extent that this inspires other people, I think that is great."

"Years and years later, you still remember what you learned in law school. You apply those principles, and as you apply them you are thinking, this is what I learned in law school."

ceived at UB Law prepared me for it very well.

"First of all, it taught me to be a good lawyer, and a good courtroom lawyer especially. I particularly remember a course in trial technique that was taught by Vincent Doyle. I was really in love with that course. It gave me a tremendous amount of preparation to do litigation.

You have to be a lot more thoughtful about what you do, because you want to arrive at the correct decision."

As for the transition from state Superior Court to the federal bench, Fuentes says that, too, comes with its challenges. "The paper that comes into chambers is unremitting," he says. "We have a huge volume of cases and motions that we