

'There is always a way'



PHOTOS BY ED SACKETT/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Making strides. After working as an assistant public defender, Mercedes León has her own law practice in Kissimmee.

Attorney conquers life's trials

Disability and poverty only steeled the resolve of the Cuban-born woman, who has opened a law office.

By **SUSAN JACOBSON**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

KISSIMMEE — Some people battle poverty. Others cope with disabilities. Still others suffer abuse.

Mercedes León has triumphed over all three.

León, 38, a former assistant Orange-Osceola public defender, recently opened a law office just steps from the new Osceola County Courthouse.

Her journey from child born without feet to Cuban immigrant to hotel maid to practicing attorney is a testament to her drive, friends say. "Some people do 100 percent," Osceola County Judge Ronald Le-

gendre said. "Some people do 150 percent. She just gives 250 percent to anything she decides to do."

León was born with a genetic disorder called neurofibromatosis, which causes tumors, skin discoloration and, sometimes, bone deformities and learning disabilities.

In León's case, her feet were little more than gnarled, misshapen knobs. Sixteen painful surgeries later — including the addition of artificial tendons and pins — she can walk, albeit with a slight limp. "I was so blessed," León said. "I dance. I do everything."

Growing up in Cuba, León en-

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Personal touch. Mercedes León hugs her client after a hearing last week in the Osceola County Courthouse.