

D6 Orlando Sentinel

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2001

Mother inspired dedication to education

LEÓN FROM D1

dured teasing from classmates who made fun of the casts she wore after her operations. They pushed her down a hill in her wheelchair and shoved her into rosebushes. Instead of growing dejected, she let the experiences build her resolve.

"It's part of who I am," she said. "It has really made me a stronger person."

León credits her mother, Aida Bennett, with instilling in her the importance of education.

Bennett made sure her daughter never missed school in spite of hospital stays and doctor visits. Bennett carried her daughter in her arms to a city bus stop at 5 a.m. so they could get to the hospital for treatment, then delivered León to school by the 8:30 a.m. starting time.

"My mother was the biggest inspiration," León said. "I walk because of her dedication and commitment."

Immigration ordeal

León's parents separated, and she, her brother and mother moved to the United States in 1980. They went first to Costa Rica with 34 other illegal refugees and eventually chartered a small boat from Bimini to Florida.

On the way, they were caught in a fearsome nighttime storm and were forced to toss their belongings overboard. As they did, she heard someone yell, "Dios mio," — "My God."

"That was my first encounter with God," she said. "In Cuba, I never heard of God because it was Communist. [Now] every single day I thank God for my life 10 times."

León and the other refugees were forced to turn back to Bimini, but eventually made it to Miami Beach on another boat.

Three bedrooms, 16 people

Friends from Cuba then living in Orlando brought them to Central Florida, where they lived in a three-bedroom house with 13 others. León and her mother, neither of whom spoke English, got minimum-wage jobs as hotel housekeepers.

They ate at a soup kitchen. They got their clothes at the Salvation Army. They eventually rented a little apartment in Kissimmee and furnished it with other people's discarded furniture.

Despite problems with her feet, León talked her way into a job as a server at Red Lobster on Vine Street, where she could earn tips.

At one point, she and her mother each worked three jobs, including food-service positions at Walt Disney World, so they could buy a house.

León taught herself English, partly by reading children's books, including one of her favorites, *Bambi*, and by watching *I Dream of Jeannie* on TV.

"She spoke so clearly," León recalled of the show's lead character.

León married and had a son, Enrique Rodriguez, now 19 and a student at the University of Central Florida. She divorced, survived an abusive relationship and her father's suicide, became a U.S. citizen and suffered through more surgeries.

Realizing her health would not permit her to continue working as a server, León decided to go to college and law school.

Her challenges made her keenly attuned to the problems of others, she said, while life in Cuba taught her the preciousness of freedom and gave her the will to fight injustice.

"I said, I can reach 35 as a waitress or I can reach 35 as an attorney," León said.

Outstanding student

With her characteristic determination, León graduated from Valencia Community College and the University of Tampa, where she was named one of three outstanding seniors, founded the Organization of Future Lawyers and tutored middle-school students in English.

León got scholarships to Stetson University College of Law and graduated in 1998. She decided she wanted to join the Orange-Osceola Public Defender's Office, so she wrote to then-Public Defender Joe DuRocher every month, declaring that she would persist until he hired her.

Last year, she was at the center of a high-profile case when she represented a 15-year-old tourist who abandoned her newborn in an Orlando hotel parking garage. A judge sentenced the teenager to live in a group home after she pleaded no contest to attempted manslaughter and child neglect. The child was put up for adoption.

In August, León and fellow former assistant public defender John Gillespie incorporated their new firm, León, Gillespie & Associates. They handle everything from criminal defense to family law.

"She's got a very strong desire to succeed, and she's got a very serious desire to help people," Gillespie said.

Not finished yet

Happily married to Robert Durham, a salesman and food server, León has her sights set on being a judge. "And maybe — who knows — the public defender," she said.

Although her illness makes León susceptible to more tumors — she has one on the bottom of her left foot — she says she doesn't worry because she is busy living.

"I want people to know that there is always a way," León said. "If you are determined, you can make it in this country no matter how difficult it is."

Susan Jacobson can be reached at sjacobson@orlandosentinel.com or 407-931-5946.



ED SACKETT/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Passion. Mercedes León pleads her client's case last week at the Osceola County Courthouse.

Ho
is St
Own your
Realtor® at

**WICKER ON
IMPORTS**
407-294-879

Bring

*With extra
you'll be abl*

3
total mo
for
only

Includes 35