

# Cynthia Elizabeth Hernandez

## Associate Attorney, Johnson & Nicholson, PLLC

### **AGE:**

28

### **WHERE WERE YOU BORN?**

Washington, D.C.

### **HOW LONG HAVE YOU LIVED IN CHARLOTTE AREA?**

One year.

### **TELL US A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT YOU?**

I am a proud daughter of immigrants and a Maryland native (Go Ravens!). I have one younger sister who will be pursuing a medical degree in the coming years. I decided to pursue the path to becoming a lawyer when I was 16 years old. My high school offered a legal studies program, where I took courses in business law and personal law. I completed my first legal internship and was an office assistant at a well-known insurance defense firm by the time I was 18 years old.

As an undergraduate student at the University of Maryland, College Park, I took classes in rhetoric, women's health issues, racial history, environmental law, and immigration. Coupled with my life experiences, these courses solidified my desire to become an attorney in order to help those in my community—including immigrants—who are facing criminal charges.

Upon my graduation from UMD in 2016, I relocated to Greensboro, North Carolina, where I taught high school Spanish for 2 years as a Teach for America Corps Member. I also coached the Junior Varsity Women's soccer team. Teaching was one of the most rewarding professional experiences I have had because it helped to fuel my passion for social justice, community involvement, and racial equity in a unique way. In fact, I still keep in touch with my students—many of whom have gone on to attend college, trade school, and the like—and it is a joy to see them reach the milestones we talked about when they were young teenagers.

Although leaving the classroom was emotionally difficult, I knew I still dreamt of becoming an attorney. I graduated from Elon University School of Law in December 2020 and became a licensed attorney in April 2021. After working for an immigration firm as a post-graduate law clerk, I began my career as an attorney at the Mecklenburg County Public Defender's Office in September 2021. My work as an Assistant Public Defender was exhilarating, rewarding, and sometimes heartbreaking, but I was surrounded by some of the most creative, hard-working, and compassionate attorneys in the country. Now, I have recently transitioned from my role at the Public Defender's Office to work as an Associate Attorney at Johnson & Nicholson, PLLC, where I focus on defending clients in both criminal and immigration ("crimmigration") matters.

### **DURING YOUR TIME VOLUNTEERING FOR A COMMUNITY ACTIVITY OR PROJECT, WHAT IS YOUR MOST MEMORABLE MOMENT?**

I volunteer my time with Mad Miles Run Club, which is a Charlotte-based, diverse run club. Mad Miles partners with Big Wave Family to distribute food to the unhoused community of Charlotte on the first Saturday of each month. One of my most memorable moments from volunteering was inviting a few of my friends to help prepare the brown bag meals the night before the first Saturday of the month. We had a very organized, yet somewhat chaotic, assembly line in my kitchen. Thanks to our team, we managed to bag and label approximately 150 meals in the span of a couple of hours. The next day, when we provided the meals, there was a mobile shower as well as free haircuts available to the folks who came to see us. This experience shows how awesome teamwork and collaboration can be for the benefit of our community.

**IN YOUR OPINION, HOW DO YOU CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMMUNITY? PLEASE BE AS DETAILED AS YOU CAN.**

In addition to volunteering with Mad Miles, I mentor prospective college students as well as law students by guiding them through the process of applying to college and/or law school. As the first person in my family to graduate from college, and as the first person in my family to become a lawyer, I understand how daunting it can be to take what may be an unprecedented route to higher-level education. I find great reward in knowing that I can be a resource to others by offering to look over applications and resumes as well as giving general advice on how to approach launching a professional career.

Moreover, in my role as an Assistant Public Defender for the past year, I served as defense counsel for the indigent community of Charlotte; namely, I represented clients who could not afford to hire an attorney. My goal is to continue assisting the indigent community as I transition into private practice because every person has the right to defend themselves against a criminal charge or potential for deportation regardless of their socioeconomic status.

**PLEASE LET US KNOW ANY AWARDS OR RECOGNITIONS YOU'VE RECEIVED IN YOUR PROFESSIONAL CAREER:**

As an Elon Law student, I co-founded and served as the President of the Hispanic and Latinx Law Students Association. I was a Dean's Scholarship Recipient, as well as a Leadership Fellow and Student Mentor. I was also selected to be a Teaching Assistant as well as a Research Assistant for various law professors. During my time as a Research Assistant, one of our papers, which focused on the government's power to commandeer healthcare facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, was published in the Journal of Emergency Management. We also published a checklist that can be used by North Carolina attorneys to help their clients defend themselves if they are charged with Death by Distribution. Shortly before graduation, I received a Pro Bono Recognition Award from Elon Law for completing at least 75 hours of pro bono work as a law student. I was also a nominated speaker at the 2022 Spring Public Defender Conference, where I presented with a fellow colleague on issues surrounding charging documents used in North Carolina District Court.

**WHAT ARE YOUR HOBBIES OR INTERESTS?**

My hobbies and interests include spending time with my family, watching sports, traveling, exercising, reading, and exploring Charlotte breweries and restaurants.

**WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE QUOTE THAT YOU STAND BY?**

"Confidence in identity leads to obedience in the assignment." - Pastor L.B.

**WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN 5 YEARS? 10 YEARS?**

Although life can certainly be unpredictable, I plan on starting a family and continuing to grow my skills in practicing crimmigration law in the next 5-10 years.

**CAN YOU SHARE ONE THING THAT IS ON YOUR BUCKET LIST?**

I would like to visit the Eastern hemisphere of the world.

**WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU USED YOUR PASSPORT?**

I last used my passport when I traveled to Honduras in 2018. I hope to use it again soon!

**WHAT IS A FUN FACT ABOUT YOURSELF THAT NO ONE KNOWS?**

I can binge watch three shows and never get tired of them: Insecure, Jane the Virgin, and How to Get Away with Murder.

**WHO IS YOUR HERO?**

This is a tough question to answer, because I can't pick just one hero. My parents are heroic because they sacrificed so much to come to a country they didn't know in order to build a better future for themselves as well as their family back home. My sister is heroic because she has excelled in her studies despite learning virtually for an entire school year. My fiancé is heroic because

he is also a first-generation college graduate and aspiring entrepreneur. All of them have shown me what it means to be tough in tough situations and to never give up on yourself.

**WHAT WAS THE LAST BOOK YOU READ?**

Finding Me by Viola Davis.

**WHAT WAS THE LAST MOVIE YOU SAW?**

A documentary called "Halftime" by Jennifer Lopez.

**WHAT WAS THE LAST CONCERT YOU SAW?**

Elderbrook at The Fillmore.

**HOW DID THE COVID PANDEMIC AFFECT YOUR PERSONAL OR PROFESSIONAL LIFE?**

I graduated from law school, became engaged to my fiancé, studied for and took the bar exam, and began my legal career as an attorney during the COVID-19 pandemic. While these are all amazing milestones, I cannot deny the impact that the pandemic had on my family members, friends, and clients. Moreover, it is without question the pandemic greatly affected the criminal legal system and the economy, which affect us all, in a myriad of ways. I believe society will continue adjusting to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic for years to come.

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