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All in the family

Father and daughter attend law school at the same time, years after mother got a J.D.

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Kathleen Currie Chavez could not have been more proud.

It was 2011, and the Foote, Mielke, Chavez & O'Neil LLC partner and then-mother of four looked at Ellie, her firstborn, a 20-year-old college graduate from the University of Wisconsin who wanted nothing more than to follow in her mother's footsteps.

Kathleen also looked at her husband, Gabriel. She met him on a Carnival Tropicale cruise when she was 18 and he was 22. Their first child was born less than a year after they met.

Kathleen focused on employment law, and she leaned on her husband for assistance with Hispanic clients. She knew he wanted to go to law school and was waiting until the family was financially stable.

His time had come. Gabriel would go to law school. Kathleen was delighted.

But who would have thought that his law school days would be the same as Ellie's?

An immigrant's vision

Growing up in Mexico's Rosarito Beach after being born in the United States, Gabriel Chavez didn't know where life would take him. He only knew that he wanted to branch out, and learning English was the first step.

"My dad wanted us to learn English," Gabriel said. "Since we were in the hotel business, speaking English was a very

important thing for my father."

Gabriel commuted daily between Tijuana and San Diego to take classes at St. Augustine High School before attending San Diego State University.

"I was just supposed to go to college and then come back and work with the family, but when I went on that vacation, I met my future wife," he said. "It was instant. We've been married 23 years now."

With their first child on the way, Gabriel and Kathleen began planning their future. She was accepted at Northern Illinois University. They moved in with her parents, but since Gabriel was a college graduate, he would get a job so they could eventually move out.

His idea? Start a cleaning service. He called his father in Mexico and asked for help.

"The hotel had a print shop," Gabriel said. "He printed for me 10,000 fliers to open a cleaning service. I will never forget my wife and I with the stroller going door to door putting those fliers in."

The handouts worked. Within four months, they had their own apartment in Wheaton.

A year later, they bought their first home. The cleaning service had paid off.

Gabriel ran that cleaning service for 12 years, selling it in 2003. By that time, the Chavez family had grown to five — Ellie was born in 1991, followed by Gabriel Jr. in 1994 and Nicole in 2000.

Meanwhile, Kathleen's law practice grew as she handled

antitrust litigation and employment law.

With a high Hispanic population in nearby Elgin, Aurora and West Chicago, Gabriel's background quickly became a great benefit to Kathleen's work, especially with her handling of employment law matters.

In one instance, a letter between Kathleen's firm and her clients included the term "discutir," which Kathleen thought meant "to discuss something."

But to the Hispanic clients, the translation meant "an argument."

The clients wrote back in a panic: "What's going on? We never argue with you."

"I called all of them and told them that everything was OK, that there was no argument," Gabriel said.

From there, Gabriel began consulting with her wife's firm.

"He's got fantastic people skills," Kathleen said. "He's excellent with my clients. They would often request him."

When he sold the cleaning service, he started a new venture — property development. He later became one of a three-person business that bought refined oil products from Mexico and sold them throughout the U.S. and into parts of Asia.

All the while, law school was in the back of his mind.

"Since I met my wife and she started to go through law school, I wanted to go to law school," he said. "I was just not able because we were not financially stable."

As his businesses grew, the opportunities came together. Gabriel now has his eyes set on immigration law.

"The Hispanic community is underrepresented when it comes to legal issues," he said. "I've seen that there is a lot of miscommunication on how the process works. So I would like to facilitate that process to the people and help the Hispanic community, which is a big deal for me."

Gabriel sees law school as an essential part of his children's education, children that now include 9-year-old Alana and 4-month-old Kathleen. If possible, he would like to make it



Kathleen Currie Chavez



Gabriel Chavez



Ellie Chavez

a prerequisite for all of them.

Mostly though, he is just happy that he made it a prerequisite for himself.

"You know the saying you cannot teach an old dog new tricks? Not true," he said. "I've learned a lot of new things that I never thought was possible."

A daughter's ambition

As far back as she can remember, Ellie Chavez always wanted to be a lawyer.

The reason? Her mother.

Money was tight for the Chavez family, so Ellie and her brother Gabriel often accompanied their mother to Northwestern University School of Law, playing under desks while she studied.

"I think it was probably a huge distraction for some of the other students," Ellie said, "but we didn't have a choice."

Ellie quickly realized there was even more fun to be had above the desks. The law was her intellectual playpen. She was mesmerized by the conversations of lawyers and law students even though she could barely understand them.

During a trip to Harvard with her mother, she marveled at the atmosphere.

The library was massive yet silent. She stared at the enormous bookshelves and their endless rows of books. This is what lawyers have to read, she thought.

"On that trip, I remember telling my mom one night that I

really wanted to be a lawyer," she said. "She was so happy. That was a time when I finally said I wanted to be like her."

In high school, Ellie excelled. She was captain of the debate team and worked on the school newspaper. After all, without any high school law course, she had to find something to do.

"There are only so many law-related things you can do in high school," she said.

Without the law, she was free to pursue other academic interests. She took advanced-placement courses her junior and senior years and, out of boredom, took classes at Elgin Community College at night.

The courses all counted toward college credit, and she entered the University of Wisconsin as a sophomore, then powered through three 18-credit semesters. Before she knew it, she had completed her English major at age 19.

Having missed the deadline to apply for the LSAT, Ellie took a year away from academia.

"I didn't do anything spectacular, which I kind of regret," she said.

"I had a couple of waitressing

jobs. I worked for my mom's law firm. I also volunteered at an orphanage in Tijuana. And I taught Sunday school here at my church. And through my church, I also volunteered at a halfway house in a homeless shelter in Aurora."

She was now ready to find a law school. To her surprise, her father was too.

"I thought it was a joke, to be honest," she said. "My parents joke around a lot, and I thought they were trying to infuriate me. I said, 'You guys aren't funny. Come on.' But it ended up being true."

Ellie found the next bit of news even more shocking: She and her father both wanted to go to NIU College of Law. Kathleen squashed that plan pretty quickly.

"There are six good schools (five downtown and one in nearby DeKalb), and you guys need to pick different ones," she told Gabriel and Ellie. "You'll have things in common but you won't be right on top of each other."

It all worked out, and they're now both second-year students at their respective schools. Gabriel is enrolled at NIU and

Ellie attends Loyola University Chicago School of Law.

She's studying international law and has developed a passion for human rights. She studied abroad in China last summer, is going to Chile in March for a comparative law class and is clerking this summer with a judge in Tijuana.

Back at home, the already exuberant Chavez family dinners are now rife with law talk. The sounds of a crying newborn are nothing compared to the verbal tennis between father and daughter.

"I've had to back out a few times," Kathleen said about the dinner-table debates at the family's St. Charles home. "She's very opinionated. He's very opinionated. ... It makes for some interesting dinners."

Gabriel loves it too.

"It's just been an unbelievable experience for me to be able to share this with my 22-year-old daughter," he said. "We'll have it forever."

Ellie is just as proud.

"I'm surprised that it took him this long to convince himself to go to law school," she said. "He is going to be a great lawyer."