

Prieto Plays at Top of His Profession in High-Profile MDL Cases



J. ALBERT DIAZ

Miami attorney Peter Prieto rose high in law firm management before redirecting back to the courtroom.

Peter Prieto got a hint at what he'd end up doing after he wandered off in the sixth grade.

The teacher sent him and four or five classmates to run an errand. They took a detour on the way back that lasted three hours. Naturally, the teacher wanted to know what took so long. Prieto came up with a convincing story. The teacher bought it.

"One of the kids turned to me and said, 'Dude, you should be a lawyer,'" Prieto said.

By then, it was already a possibility he was considering.

Born in Guines, Cuba, Prieto came to the United States when he was 7. His father found work as a mechanic, his mother in a factory. Neither finished high school. Starting over in Hialeah, they emphasized the value of education for their son and of becoming a professional, Prieto said.

"As a Cuban kid there's essentially sort of two choices — either a doctor or a lawyer," he said. "The sciences did not interest me at all, and I could always talk a good game and argue a lot."

It was still a long way from there to where he is now, a partner at Podhurst Orseck handling complex civil litigation and criminal defense, and the lead plaintiffs counsel in the Takata air bag multidistrict litigation.

He got his undergraduate degree in political science, then was accepted to law school at the University of Miami. He focused on litigation, and a part-time clerkship with the U.S. attorney's office during law school helped cement his decision.

"I saw the work that they did. I got to know the people there," Prieto said. "I saw how often they got into the courtroom and how important and substantive the work was."

GETTING EXPERIENCE

After graduation, though, he took a job at Holland & Knight, working in maritime litigation.

Two years later, he returned to the U.S. attorney's office.

"What drew me back was simple," he said. "I wanted a lot of experience, and I wanted to get into the courtroom."

He started in the civil division, dealing with forfeiture cases. After about a year, he moved to handling gun and drug cases in the major crimes section. He spent two years there before going to the economic crime section.

"I chose economic crimes because they tend to be a lot like civil. They tend to be more sophisticated, with lots of paper, and I enjoyed that. I enjoyed digging through paper and figuring out what the fraud was and what the scheme was."

He was there eight years and became deputy chief of the economic crime unit when he was invited to go to Washington, D.C., by then-Hol-

land & Knight partner Daniel Pearson. Pearson had been appointed to head the Office of the Independent Counsel investigating the financial dealings of then-Commerce Secretary Ron Brown. Prieto was less than a year in when Brown died in an plane crash, bringing an abrupt end to the investigation.

Prieto returned to Miami and to Holland & Knight, where he had begun his legal career more than a decade before, again at Pearson's invitation. He stayed for almost 14 years, rising to become executive partner of the firm's Miami office and chair of the 430-attorney litigation section.

"The bulk of my work was defending large corporations," including Reebok, Motorola and Tenet Healthcare, he said.

BACK TO COURT

In 2009, Prieto was asked to join Podhurst Orseck. It was the Miami firm's first lateral hire in nearly three decades.

"I was flabbergasted," he said. "I was surprised, if not shocked."

He was more than happy at Holland & Knight, but the move offered him a chance to get back to something he loved.

"I was doing so much management at Holland & Knight and, if I had stayed there, I would have continued to do management. But I also said, 'I've reached a point in my career where I want to get back to the courtroom.'"

He did. Since joining Podhurst in 2010, Prieto has represented clients in litigation against industries including health care, telecommunications, petroleum, aviation, entertainment and banking. He also has served at the leadership level in several MDL proceedings — on the plaintiffs' executive committees of the General Motors ignition switch case and bank overdraft litigation against Bank of America, Wells Fargo and others; and as chair of the experts committee in Blue Cross Blue Shield anti-trust litigation.

And now Takata. "I have been blessed," he said. But it also has been the result of his own determination.

"I'm a big believer that you stick to the fundamentals," he said. "You work hard. You learn your profession. And I think if you do that, things will take care of themselves."

But most importantly, he said, "You have to enjoy it."

PETER PRIETO

Born: 1961, Guines, Cuba

Spouse: Caren

Children: David, Isabella, Daniel

Education: University of Miami, J.D., 1985; Biscayne College, B.A., 1982

Experience: Partner, Podhurst Orseck, 2010-present; Miami executive partner, Holland & Knight, 1996-2010; Associate deputy independent counsel, Office of the Independent Counsel, Washington, D.C., 1995-1996; Assistant U.S. Attorney, U.S. attorney's office, Southern District of Florida, 1987-1995; Associate, Holland & Knight, 1985-1987