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Reyes moves to new spot, becomes first Latino elected to appeals court

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As a newly elected appellate justice, Jesse G. Reyes said he often remembers a lesson he learned many years ago from former Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley.

Daley lived a few blocks from Reyes' working-class family on the South Side and would wave to young Reyes from his limousine as Reyes loaded newspapers into his wagon as a paperboy.

"He was the mayor of the city of Chicago and he took time to say, 'Hi,' to the paperboy," Reyes said. "I always took from that, you never forget where you came from, and in whichever way you can, make sure you give back."

The oldest of four children, Reyes worked several jobs in middle school and high school, from delivering newspapers to working as a bagger at a grocery store. He dreamed of becoming an attorney someday, he said.

"Lawyers were the people who spoke for those who couldn't speak for themselves," said Reyes, 60. "They're the ones who stood up for people's rights."

Reyes got elected to the 1st District Appellate Court in November, becoming the first Latino in Illinois elected to the appellate bench. Reyes did not realize that he made history until after the election, he said.

"I'm deeply honored and humbled," he said. "And the way I look at it, it's opening the door for others."

He began his 10-year term on Dec. 3.

Reyes ran unopposed in November but faced four opponents in the March Democratic primary for the position of retired Appellate Justice Sheila M. O'Brien.

"He's a judge of the people, he really is," Illinois Supreme Court Justice Thomas L. Kilbride said.

The Supreme Court's chambers in Chicago remained packed for Reyes' swearing-in ceremony on Dec. 3, said Kilbride, who presided over the ceremony. Current appellate justices, state and county elected officials and Reyes' friends and family attended.

"He's the kind of judge that if I were arguing a case, I would feel comfortable walking into the courtroom because he's smart, he's well-prepared, he's a hard-worker," Kilbride said.

Reyes graduated from The John Marshall Law School in 1982 and worked for the city of Chicago in the corporation counsel's office, representing the city in cases where the city's potential liability involved at least \$1 million.

While working for the city, Reyes occasionally encountered attorney John D. Cooney on the opposite side in court.



Jesse G. Reyes

"We became very good friends and I attribute that largely to the fact that Jesse is just a naturally engaging guy," said Cooney, a partner at Cooney & Conway.

"When I was a young lawyer and Jesse was a young lawyer, everyone knew Jesse Reyes. He's got the quick smile, funny wit ... and just an outrageous head of hair that makes you never forget him."

After working for the city, Reyes then took a position with the Chicago Board of Education in 1995. As an assistant attorney there, he helped develop reform policies for the school district, from dress code to regulating local school council elections.

"Many times as a lawyer you're preparing a case for trial

and you don't really see the ultimate final product until maybe some years later," Reyes said. "What I really enjoyed at the board of education was the fact that I would develop a policy or procedure and you see it implemented in the school right away."

Cook County Circuit Court judges elected Reyes as an associate judge in 1997. In 2008, he successfully ran for election to become a circuit judge and worked in that position until advancing to the appellate court last week.

"I'm honored," he said. "Here I am sitting at a table with three other colleagues who have more experience than I do, who have been on the appellate court longer than I have, whose opinion in many cases I followed. ... I've relied on their decisions and to be the new person on the block, it's a thrill."

Reyes, known for his involvement in dozens of bar groups and legal organizations, said he plans to continue his community presence where possible.

He previously served as president of the Illinois Judges Association, the Illinois Judges Foundation and The John Marshall Law School Alumni Association.

"I'm an individual who believes in participating, being active," Reyes said. "And so I think from that standpoint, it's not going to be cloistered for me."