

## SHE'S BILEGAL

By DON KAPLAN

September 25, 2006 -- ON the streets of New York, only Hispanic people seem to notice Cristina Perez, the sassy judge who presides over "Cristina's Court," the new daytime court show.

The reactions of her star-struck fans attract the attention of other people who don't speak Spanish and so have no idea who Perez is.

That could all change by this time next year.

"Telemundo used to call me the Latina Judge Judy, because I could sometimes scold people in my court," says Perez. "But really I [behave] differently with each case - there's no one way you can define me."

She became popular as the host of a Spanish-language television program, "La Corte de Familia" (Family Court), which aired in 15 countries on Telemundo. The show was one of the highest-rated Spanish-language programs in the U.S.

Five years ago, Perez made history as the star of the first-ever Spanish-language court show, "La Corte Del Pueblo" (People's Court), which aired locally in Los Angeles. Perez's family history is the pure American dream. Her parents emigrated from Columbia just before she was born, the youngest of three siblings, in New York. The family moved around, from Mexico to Connecticut to California, while her father worked on his way to becoming a surgeon.

Her new show, "Cristina's Court," debuted about two weeks ago (1 p.m. on WNYW/Ch.5) and so far is holding its own in the cutthroat daytime TV ratings race.

"People keep saying to me, 'You're crossing over [from Latin pop culture to American pop culture], and I'm really not because I've been doing this all my life,' she says. "The notion of 'crossing over' is funny to me because there are so many people of my generation where we do this every day. I've learned to balance both cultures equally so I don't sacrifice anything from either one."

Perez says her goal is really to entertain and maybe teach a few life lessons along the way by using her cases to tell good stories.

"I always say that the law is like therapy - when you sue somebody it's a release of emotion. And half the time, the most beautiful thing about a lawsuit is the reason why they [the plaintiff] sued.

"If we can get to that other, deeper issue by handling the legal issue, that's great."

To make the show, each Tuesday Perez commutes from her home in L.A. to Houston, where Twentieth Television (a division of News Corp., which also owns The Post) has a courtroom studio that she shares with companion show "Judge Alex." She's home by Saturday.

The trip takes her away from daughter Sophia, 3, and husband Christopher for most of the week.

"You learn how to balance things," says Perez. "When one door opens, walk in and you deal with it. But I miss being around my daughter a lot. At the same time, she's getting closer to my husband, which is great."



Spanish-language TV sensation Cristina Perez stopped by The Post to discuss her new show, "Cristina's Court."

Photo: N.Y. Post/Liz Sullivan