# THE FIRST LATINA LAW GRADUATES AND LAWYERS IN COLORADO

by Dolores S. Atencio

**1894 was the year the first women earned law degrees in Colorado: Jeannette Dunham Bennett, University of Colorado, and Ann Hunt, University of Denver. Seven decades would pass before both law schools graduated the first Latina.**

*Luminarias de la Ley | Luminaries of the Law*™ is a national legal history project created to identify the first Latinas who earned law degrees between 1880 and 1980 (*Luminarias*) and document their accomplishments. This article is the first in a series of state bar articles designed to identify and present empirical data about that state's *Luminarias*. Before 1993, there was no research or literature exclusively about Latina lawyers. Despite devoting years to identify the Latina equivalent of Margaret Brent (the first woman to practice law per the ABA Commission on Women), the earliest Latina lawyers proved elusive. The task of identifying these women triggered a seven-year journey.

The *Luminarias* Study was a quantitative study conducted from 2016 to 2022 that included 167 ABA-accredited law schools. The *Luminarias* Study consisted of three phases. In Phase I, a database of female law graduates from each of the schools was compiled. Law commencement programs, cross-referenced with law alumni directories, bulletins, yearbooks, and alumni newsletters, were some of the source materials. Phase I identified 2,543 potential *Luminarias*. During Phase II, verification of the gender and ancestry of the 2,543 was necessary because law schools did not record the racial or ethnic heritage of law students during the 100-year study period. This process resulted in the identification of 1,347 *Luminarias*. The bar status and career paths of *Luminarias* were traced during Phase III. Key empirical research findings were published by UCLA School of Law in September 2023 in "Luminarias: An Empirical

Portrait of the First Generation of Latina Lawyers 1880–1980" (*Luminarias* article). The *Luminarias* Study produced a national empirical baseline on the first generation of Latina lawyers that includes their ancestry, where they were educated, and where they were licensed and practiced.

## THE COLORADO LUMINARIAS

Among the 1,347 Latinas identified in the *Luminarias* Study, 40 had Colorado connections: 30 were graduates of the University of Denver Sturm College of Law (DU Law) or the University of Colorado Law School (CU Law), and 10 obtained law degrees elsewhere but were licensed in Colorado.

### Racial and Ethnic Composition

Determining who is Latina is a complex issue; the criteria and ethical considerations were addressed at length in the *Luminarias* article. The *Luminarias* Study included those with partial to full Latina ancestry. The breakdown of the 40 Colorado Latinas was as follows:

- Mexican—34;
- Cuban—2 (1 Cuban-born);
- Puerto Rican—1; and
- Mixed race—3 (1 Afro-Puerto Rican and 2 Latina/white).

### Law Schools and Licensure—Key Findings

Though CU and DU law schools graduated their first female students in 1894, the *Luminarias* Study found there were no Latina law graduates over the 73-year period of 1892 to 1965, or in 1967, 1968, 1969, 1974, and 1975. The first Colorado *Luminaria*, Mariana Roca, earned her law degree in 1966 from CU Law, and the first DU Law graduate, Betty Camunez, earned her law degree in 1970, both the sole Latina law graduates that year and in the state. The *Luminarias* Study found that single Latina law graduates during the earliest decades was the national pattern, "replicating the experience of women lawyers in the latter part of the 19th century." Over 100 years, 30 Latinas graduated from law school: 14 were graduates of CU Law and 16 were graduates of DU Law. Eight of the 30 were licensed in another state, and two were not licensed in Colorado.

**TABLE 1**
**Number of Latina Law Graduates by Year**

| YEAR | TOTAL NO. | CU LAW | DU LAW | CU FEMALE 1-L* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1892-1965 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| 1966 | 1 | 1 | 0 | |
| 1967 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7 |
| 1968 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 13 |
| 1969 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 11 |
| 1970 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 19 |
| 1971 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 23 |
| 1972 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 35 |
| 1973 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 24 |
| 1974 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 44 |
| 1975 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 38 |
| 1976 | 2 | 1 | 1 | |
| 1977 | 2 | 1 | 1 | |
| 1978 | 3 | 2 | 1 | |
| 1979 | 6 | 1 | 5 | |
| 1980 | 11 | 6 | 5 | |
| **Total** | **30** | **14** | **16** | **214** |

* US Commission on Civil Rights, Colorado Advisory Committee Report, "Access to the Legal Profession in Colorado by Minorities and Women," Table 3 at 28 (June 1976), https://www2.law.

### Number of Women Law Graduates in Comparison to Latinas

It is important to contextualize the number of *Luminarias* through the lens of women's progression in the legal profession. During the first 100 years of legal education, women virtually were absent. In 1870, there were five women lawyers; in 1880, there were 200 women lawyers; and in 1930, there were 3,385 women lawyers. Until 1920, women comprised 1% of the total lawyer population and then stagnated until 1960 at 3%. In comparison, the *Luminarias* Study found there was one *Luminaria* among the "First Generation of American Women Lawyers (1880–1916)." Further, *Luminarias* constituted less than 1% of all women lawyers until 1970, when they surpassed (barely) that level at 1.04%.

In 1970, although women accounted for 51 percent of the United States population, they were only 12.5 percent of students in law school . . . . In 1970, 5 percent of Colorado lawyers were women. [6.09% in the country]. Minorities constituted 4 percent of all lawyers in the State, and minority women were only 0.14 percent.

Latinas were impacted by their ancestry, but to a greater extent, by the gender discrimination denying women admission to law schools and the bar. By the mid-1970s, women law students comprised 25% of the total student population at CU Law and 35% at DU Law. Table 2 provides a contrasting visual representation of the number of women 1Ls at CU Law for the years 1967 to 1975 (214), in contrast to the five *Luminaria* graduates from both schools over the same years. In 1980, women comprised 8% of all lawyers nationwide, while *Luminarias* continued to be disproportionately underrepresented at 1.47%, increasing to 2.42% by 1981. In 2009, the Hispanic National Bar Association (HNBA) quantified the number of full-time Latina lawyers at 25,000 and today estimates the total at 35,000 (or 2.5% of the total lawyer population). While the overall number of Latina lawyers has increased, their growth has stagnated at 2.5%, essentially the 1981 level. Given their total US population of 19%, Latina lawyers continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in the legal profession at 2.5%.

## Latino Law Graduates in Comparison to Number of Latina Law Graduates

Spanish-surnamed male graduates were recorded during the *Luminarias* Study, but only from the year the first female graduated from the 167 law schools in the study, which, almost universally, was not the first graduating class. Thus, not all Spanish-surnamed males may have been captured during the preceding years. Their ancestry was neither researched nor verified because the focus was on Latinas. With these disclaimers, it is instructive to present the number of Spanish-surnamed male graduates in contrast to the number of *Luminarias*. The *Luminarias* Study revealed a significant nationwide disparity—triple to quadruple the number of Latino law graduates to *Luminarias*. Fifty-three and 20 years, respectively, separate the first Latino/a CU and DU law graduates. Twenty years is lower than the national pattern. (Westminster Law, 1912 to 1957, later merged with DU Law.)

**TABLE 2**

***Unverified* Comparison Latino to Latina Law Graduates, Colorado Law Schools, 1894–1980**

| LAW SCHOOL | 1ST LATINO LAW GRAD | 1ST LATINA LAW GRAD | DIFFERENCE IN YEARS | NO. LATINO LAW GRADS | NO. LATINA LAW GRADS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CU Law | 1913 | 1966 | 55 Years | 58 | 14 |
| Westminster/ DU Law | 1950 | 1970 | 20 Years | 110 | 16 |
| **Total** | | | | **168** | **30** |

## Licensure and Practice Areas

The *Luminarias* Study found that 1,188 of the 1,347 *Luminarias* who earned law degrees became licensed. In Colorado, 31 *Luminarias* were admitted to the bar, constituting 2.52% of the 1,188 *Luminarias* licensed nationwide. Of the 31 admittees, 21 were graduates of CU or DU law schools. Ten earned JDs from out-of-state law schools: Berkeley, DePaul/Chicago, Florida, Georgetown, Golden Gate, Harvard, Indiana Mauer, Stanford, and UCLA. Seven of the Colorado bar admittees were also licensed in other states, including Arizona, California, the District of Columbia, Florida, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas. The empirical data on career paths includes all 40 *Luminarias* with Colorado roots. The number of positions exceeds 40 because most *Luminarias* held multiple jobs during their careers. Following the national pattern, Colorado *Luminarias* entered in descending numerical order: (1) private practice, some transitioning to-from government work, (2) government/public service, (3) the judiciary, and (4) the legal academy.

**TABLE 3**

***Luminaria* Career Paths**

Private Practice and Industry **30**
- Private Practice **22**
- Corporate Counsel **2**
- Law Firm Partners **6**

Government Attorneys **21**
- Federal **7**
- State **12**
- City **2**

Legal Aid Attorneys **4**

Prosecutor/Public Defender **3**

Other/Non-Attorney **4**

Judiciary **11**
- Article III **1**
- Federal ALJ **1**
- District Court **1**
- County Court **3**
- State ALJ **2**
- Municipal Court **2**
- Magistrate **1**

Academia **4**
- Tenured **1**
- Assistant Dean **1**
- Adjunct Professor **1**
- Visiting Scholar **1**

Among the Colorado *Luminarias* are (1) the first solo practitioners, Joyce Sanchez and Luz Young-Rodriguez, and (2) the first law firm partners, Angelina Irizarry (1986, Rothgerber, Appel & Powers) and Christine Arguello (1988, Holland and Hart). The first judges were: Article III Judge Arguello (2008); District Court Judge Carmen Otero (1980); County Court Judges Sylvia Manzanares (1995), Virginia Chavez (1983), and Erin Fernandez-Ely (2000); and Administrative Law Judge Antoinette Martinez (1979). In 1999, Aurora Ruiz-Hernandez became the first Latina deputy director of

a Colorado agency (personnel and general services administration) after serving as a first assistant attorney general in labor and civil rights. Peggy Montaño, also a first assistant in the water section/natural resources, became a law partner after starting as a Reggie Fellow at Denver Metropolitan Legal Aid. Accomplished public defender Judy Lucero later became a writer and defense counsel on death penalty cases. Prosecutors Chavez, Fernandez-Ely, and Carolyn Carrasco and the other government attorneys, such as Denver City Attorney Jacqueline Hernandez-Berardini, were the first in their respective positions. The *Luminarias* Study found that approximately a third of *Luminarias*, like Judge Arguello, are repeat "accomplishers," achieving milestone upon milestone (an occurrence attributable in part to their unique talent and drive and in part because the times demanded their leadership). Two *Luminarias,* Ruth Casarez and Linda Leon, were incorporators of the CHBA in 1977. Casarez became the CHBA's first female president (1979, 1980), followed by *Luminaria* Atencio in 1991 (also HNBA president, 1991–92) and Montaño in 1995.

Unsurprisingly, the *Luminarias* Study found a natural connectivity between today's Latina lawyers and *Luminarias*—specifically, career paths. Younger generations enter certain sectors (e.g., government service) in greater numbers and navigate more fluidly because of the paths forged by *Luminarias.* Or, in other sectors (e.g., the corporate sector, law firms, and the legal academy), due to the exclusion of *Luminarias,* Latina lawyers encounter residual barriers to success. For example, the *Luminarias* Study documented few tenured *Luminaria* professors, none of whom were appointed dean of a US law school, though there were *Luminaria* assistant deans. Indeed, only one Colorado *Luminaria,* Christine Arguello, became a tenured law professor. Currently, there are six Latina deans (nine over 126 years of legal education since Ellen Spencer Mussey became the first female dean in 1898). Fifty-eight *Luminarias* were corporate counsel, with a handful becoming general counsel (GC). In 2023, there were 14 Latina GCs in Fortune 1000 companies (up from four in 2008), and less than 1% of all equity partners in large law firms were Latina. In comparison, Latinas comprise 3% of the US judiciary and, while disproportionate to their 9% population rate, this percentage surpasses most other sectors, traceable to the success of *Luminarias* in the judiciary.

It is refreshing to report that, despite their disproportionate numbers, the succeeding generations of Latina lawyers have equaled or surpassed the accomplishments of Colorado *Luminarias* with broader success across more segments of the profession. In Colorado, there are 1.2 million Hispanics, representing 22.5% of the state's population. The precise number of Latina lawyers is difficult to quantify due to the pattern by reporting agencies to subsume the number of Latinas (or women of color) into the broader categories of Latino/male attorneys of color and/or women. According to the Colorado Office of Regulatory Counsel 2022 Report, Latino attorneys constitute 7.59% of lawyers. Applying the HNBA national average of 2.5%, there are 705 Latina attorneys among the 28,218 active Colorado lawyers. With more precise reporting, the interconnectivity between *Luminarias* and today's lawyers (the *Luminaria* effect) in Colorado could be more accurately studied and defined. Like the *Luminarias,* the gains made by Latina lawyers—despite or because of their disproportionate representation—are to be commended and supported.

## CONCLUSION

With the youngest *Luminarias* now 67 or 68 years of age, most *Luminarias*, including those in Colorado, are retired. Seven remain actively engaged within the profession or in other work. Four Colorado *Luminarias* have passed before and since the *Luminarias* Study was launched. This article presents a sketch empirical portrait of the 40 *Luminarias* who broke through seemingly insurmountable barriers to become the first Latina lawyers in Colorado over the 100-year period of 1880 to 1980, leaving for future writings their impact on the Colorado legal profession and community. The indomitable spirit of the Colorado *Luminarias*, combined with their accomplishments, will surely continue to motivate and touch the lives of younger generations to follow.

# APPENDIX

## TABLE 4

**Colorado's First 40 *Luminarias* 1880–1980 by Year of Graduation | Year of Admissions**

*+ denotes JD and bar admission in same year; * indicates licensed on same date as others*

1. **Mariana Roca-Shulstad**
1966 CU + CO & AZ

2. **Betty Camuñez**
1970 DU + CO | 1972 NM

3. **Carmen Otero**
1971 CU | 1973 WA

4. **Margaret Martinez***
1972 DU | 10/1974 CO

5. **Linda Leon***
1972 UCLA | 10/1974 CO

6. **Ruth Casarez**
1973 DU + CO | 1985 TX

7. **Guadalupe Lechuga**
1975 DePaul | 1976 CO

8. **Carolyn Lobato-Bleidt***
1976 CU | 10/1976 CO

9. **Carolyn Carrasco***
1976 Berkeley | 10/1976 CO

10. **Antoinette Martinez***
1977 DU | 5/1977 CO

11. **Sylvia Manzanares**
1977 CU | 10/1977 CO

12. **Elena Romero Morgan**
1973 DU | 1977 PA
1999 NM Deceased

13. **Virginia Chavez**
1978 DU | 1978 CO

14. **Bernadette Maes-Langbein**
1978 CU | 1986 NJ

15. **Mary Helen Medina Lopez**
1978 CU | Not Licensed in CO

16. **Liova Garcia-Juarez***
1979 DU | 5/1979 CO

17. **Erin Fernandez-Ely***
1975 Florida | 5/1979-CO, FL

18. **Miriam Aguiar**
1979 DU + PA | 1987 CA

19. **Eva Camacho Woodard**
1979 DU | 1979 CO

20. **Dolores Martinez-Hernandez**
1980 CU | 4/1980 CO

21. **Katherine Vigil**
1979 Georgetown | 8/1980 CO

22. J**udy Lucero***
1979 DU | 10/1980 CO

23. **Jacqueline Hernandez-Berardini***
1980 DU | 10/1980

24. **Leticia Luna**
1980 DU | 11/1980 TX

25. **Michael Sharon Gallegos***
1979 DU | 5/1981 CO Deceased

26. **Peggy Montaño***
1980 CU | 5/1981 CO

27. **Janet Rodriguez-Kramer***
1980 CU | 5/1981 CO Deceased

28. **Christine Alvarez**
1976 Stanford + CA | 7/1981 CO

29. **Joyce Sanchez**
1980 DU | 8/1981 CO

30. **Dolores Atencio**
1980 DU | 10/1981 CO

31. **Angelina Irizarry**
1979 Harvard | 10/1981 CO |
1980 NY

32. **Beatrice Pacheco**
1980 CU | 11/1981 PA

33. **Gilda Gonzalez**
1979 CU | 12/1981 PA

34. **Louise Romero**
1980 CU | 12/1981

35. **Dolores Alvarado-Hibbs**
1980 CU | 1982 TX

36. **Aurora Ruiz-Hernandez**
1976 DU | 5/1983 CO

37. **Flora Rodriguez-Russell**
1980 DU | 5/1983 CO
Deceased

38. **Sandra Moreno**
1980 Golden Gate + TX
1984 CO

39. **Christine Arguello**
1980 Harvard + FL | 1985 CO

40. **Luz Young-Rodriguez** 1978
Indiana Maurer | 1986 CO

# APPENDIX

## TABLE 5

**First 21 Colorado *Luminarias* 1880–1980**
**Law Graduates and Admittees Listed by Date of Licensure[1]**

| NO. | *LUMINARIA* | JD YEAR AND LAW SCHOOL | DATE OF COLORADO ADMISSION |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Mariana Roca-Shulstad | 1966 CU | 10/1966 |
| 2 | Betty Camuñez | 1970 CU | 10/1970 |
| 3 | Ruth Casarez | 1973 DU | 5/2/1973 |
| 4 | Margaret Martinez | 1972 DU | 10/16/1974 |
| 5 | Carolyn Lobato-Bleidt | 1976 CU | 10/21/1976 |
| 6 | Antoinette Martinez | 1977 DU | 5/17/1977 |
| 7 | Sylvia Manzanares | 1977 CU | 10/17/1977 |
| 8 | Virginia Chavez | 1978 DU | 9/29/1978 |
| 9 | Liova Garcia-Juarez | 1979 DU | 5/1/1979 |
| 10 | Eva Camacho Woodard | 1979 DU | 5/1/1979 |
| 11 | Dolores Martinez Hernandez | 1980 CU | 4/30/1980 |
| 12 | Judy Lucero | 1979 DU | 10/17/1980 |
| 13 | Jacqueline Hernandez-Berardini | 1980 DU | 10/17/1980 |
| 14 | Michael Sharon Gallegos | 1979 CU | 5/15/1981 |
| 15 | Peggy Montaño | 1980 CU | 5/15/1981 |
| 16 | Janet Rodriguez-Kramer | 1980 CU | 5/15/1981 |
| 17 | Joyce Sanchez | 1980 DU | 8/24/1981 |
| 18 | Dolores Atencio | 1980 DU | 10/16/1981 |
| 19 | Louise Romero | 1980 CU | 12/12/1981 |
| 20 | Aurora Ruiz-Hernandez | 1976 DU | 5/25/1983 |
| 21 | Flora Rodriguez-Russell | 1976 DU | 5/25/1983 |

1. This list was prepared for historical purposes only. Special thanks to CHBA President Amber Gonzales (JD 2016 CU) and Ben Ochoa (JD 1987 CU), partner at Lewis Roca. In 1950, Lewis and Roca was founded by Orme Lewis and Paul McClennan Roca, father of *Luminaria* Mariana Roca. Rothgerber, Johnson & Lyons merged with Lewis Roca in 2013.

## NOTES

1. *See* Atencio, "Luminarias: An Empirical Portrait of the First Generation of Latina Lawyers 1880–1980," 39 *Chicanx-Latinx L. Rev. 1* (2023), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/43f12635. The full *Luminarias* Study is on file with the author.

2. *Id.* at 16–30.

3. In previous writings, Betty Camuñez was identified as the first Latina lawyer in Colorado. This was updated in the *Luminarias* Study based on its criteria for determining who is Latina.

4. Atencio, *supra* note 1 at 51–52.

5. Atencio, *supra* note 1 at Appendix A, *Luminarias* by State and School. This number was updated from 15. The research is fluid.

6. Research began with the name listed at graduation thereafter matched to state bar records. When a *Luminaria* was not found, additional research was required, which proved difficult. It was not uncommon, through circuitous research, to find that *Luminarias* changed surnames through marriage or divorce. *See* Atencio, *supra* note 1 at Appendix C, Methodology.

7. The phrase "First Generation of American Women Attorneys" was coined by Jill Norgren in "Ladies of Legend: The First Generation of American Women Attorneys," *35 J. of Sup. Ct. Hist.* 71 (2010).

8. Atencio, *supra* note 1 at 32 and sources cited, especially Cynthia Fuchs Epstein and Jill Norgren.

9. Atencio, *supra* note 1 at 4.

10. Atencio, *supra* note 1 at 32–33. See Table 1, Women Lawyers and Luminarias by the Numbers, 1880–1980.

11. Former DU Law Dean Robert Yegge started a special admissions program to admit Latinos in 1967 (as did CU Law) that later was expanded to other students of color. *DU Law Progress Report to the Ford Foundation Law School Preparatory Program for College Graduates of Spanish-American Descent* (Sept. 1, 1967), https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED021682.pdf. See also https://www.law.du.edu/about/history.

12. Atencio, *supra* note 1 at 56.

13. Formerly the Chicano Bar Association.

14. CHBA, Mission and History, Past Presidents, https://chba.net.

15. Atencio, *supra* note 1 at 60–74, C. *Luminaria Career Paths and Milestones: Chosen or Imposed?*

16. In 2023, the HNBA created a Special Committee on Hispanic Faculty and Law Deans to address the problem. *See* https://hnba.com/special-committee-on-hispanic-law-faculty-and-deans/#. The Graciela Olivarez Latinas in the Legal Academy (GO LILA) at https://conferences.law.stanford.edu/go-lila-workshop-2023.

17. Atencio, *supra* note 1 at 60–74; Cruz, "Still Too Few and Far Between," *AC HNBA 2023 Noticias* 8–10, https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/kc05to5dhal32i9kiwiy1/AC2023-Programo92123.pdf.o.

18. Office of Attorney Regulation Counsel, 2022 Annual Report, Appendix A, Table A-2: Race/Ethnicity/National Origin, at 46, https://coloradosupremecourt .com/PDF/AboutUs/Annual%20 Reports/2022%20Annual%20 Report.PDF.

19. *Accord* ABA 2023 Profile of the Legal Profession, Demographics, https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/news/2023/potlp-2023.pdf.

20. Upon conferring with CHBA President Amber Gonzales, we estimate the number closer to 500, considering self-identification and the increase of Latina law students since 2009.

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