

Wapner tradition lives on with 'Cristina's Court'

By: ANN ZIVOTSKY - For the North County Times

Judge Joseph Wapner began the craze more than 20 years ago with "The People's Court," and Dustin Hoffman's "Rain Man" couldn't go a day without watching. Since then, TV judge shows have covered divorce and family issues, and run the gamut from "Judge Judy" to "Judge Joe Brown."

Cristina Perez is a lawyer who is as likely to hug the plaintiff as she is to pound her gavel. The former host of Telemundo's court show, "La Corte de Familia," Perez is now hosting "Cristina's Court" and she plans to keep her same style, but in a different language.

"How could it differ?" Perez said during a telephone interview. "It's the same personality in a different language. We'll look at each case in depth and rule on that law that applies to it. And we're going to try to educate about the law."

Born in the United States to Colombian parents, Perez grew up in both America and Mexico. She earned two bachelor's degrees from UC Los Angeles and her law degree from Whittier Law School in Los Angeles, where she and her husband maintain a law firm. She hosted "La Corte De Familia" ("The People's Court") on Telemundo, available on Spanish-language stations in the United States, where it was the No. 2 daytime show on that network for four years. The show also aired in 15 countries.

Though the law can be unemotional, Perez is not.

"I don't wear rubber gloves in the courtroom. It's important for me to feel the emotions of the people in the case, but to rule by the law that applies," Perez said.

This is the television season to see if English-speaking viewers will be attracted to stories from Spanish-language television. My Network TV has created English-language versions of some of the world's most popular telenovelas in the new 13-week series "Desire" and "Fashion House." ABC is launching a weekly series, "Ugly Betty," based on the hugely popular Colombian telenovela "Betty la Fea."

Does Perez think her Spanish-speaking audience will follow her to an English-speaking show?

"I hope Fox (television) brought me to attract everyone," Perez said. "They've always had a very diversified audience. It happens to be a show that has a Latina, but I'm about what America is about ---- hard working. I would be remiss if I didn't want to attract my audience from Telemundo, but I also want to attract a larger audience."

Part of what has attracted her Telemundo fans to her show is the wisdom she's learned from her own family.

"There are life lessons I've learned from my family and I want to share with the audience," Perez said.

Many of those nuggets of wisdom are included in a new book Perez has written, "Living by Los Dichos," scheduled to be released by Simon & Schuster on Sept. 19.

Dichos are Spanish-language proverbs, and Perez says her mother has shared dozens with her during the years.

"It's about the great cultural background and the way my parents raised me," said Perez, adding, "I started the book off that way, but what it became a symbolic tool about the way my family raised me and what I became today growing up in America."

"Christina's Court" will air weekdays at 11 a.m. on XETV/Channel 6 and 4 p.m. on XDTV/Channel 13, the new My Network TV affiliate.