



Ramón J. Jiménez Biography

1949-2016

Three words, “Harvard-educated lawyer,” have followed Ramón J. Jiménez ever since he skipped his 1974 law school graduation, hopped on a bus and returned to New York City. The words were intended not as a boast, but as a warning to anyone who might underestimate him: a legal paladin in a cluttered South Bronx office that was both a salon for progressive political action and a destination of last resort for the wronged, the injured and the falsely accused. Mr. Jiménez, 67, died on May 10, 2016 from prostate cancer, an illness he confronted with his typical zeal; soon after learning he had the disease, he ran for New York State attorney general on the Green Party ticket.

Over the decades, he led the fight to save Hostos Community College in the South Bronx; he railed against police brutality years before the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement; and he took on the political skulduggery of Ramón S. Vélez, the power broker denounced by former Mayor Edward I. Koch as a “poverty pimp.” He took on Mr. Koch, too, over the closing of city hospitals.

More recently, he spearheaded a campaign to remove the leadership that had mismanaged the National Puerto Rican Day Parade. Mentored by Jack Newfield, the legendary muckraker, and inspired by Pedro Albizu Campos, the Puerto Rican nationalist, Mr. Jiménez wrote investigative pieces and political analyses. Throughout, he found time to represent injured workers, single mothers facing eviction and others who needed a break.

Some called him a voice for the voiceless, a phrase he might have rejected as self-aggrandizing. The poor and powerless, he knew, have perfectly fine voices. The question is who's listening. In this regard, one of Ramon's leading battles was crimes against children. He served as Honorary Advisor, together with Andrew Vachss, to support the Legislative Drafting Institute for Child Protection, whose purpose is to create, upon request, highly specific legislation to accomplish the goals of self-organized, grassroots organizations which intend to achieve a child protective objective. Mr. Vachss is a prolific American crime fiction author, and widely acknowledged child protection consultant, and attorney, exclusively representing children and youths.

“He did not believe in God, he believed in people,” his daughter, Laila Roman-Jiménez, said. “It’s harder to believe in people instead of God, because people let you down. But he saw the good in everybody. He believed in the power of the people.”

That belief was not an intellectual exercise, but a conviction forged growing up in East Elmhurst, Queens, as a black Puerto Rican who lived down the street from Malcolm X. His father, Ramón, served in the military and came home with a debilitating mental illness. His mother, Alicia, worked tirelessly in garment factories, but everyone knew that if you were hungry, she would feed you. When she was mugged in a park and local drug addicts mercilessly pummeled her assailant, she begged the mob not to kill him, said Andrew Vachss, who once practiced with Mr. Jiménez. He said those experiences shaped his lifelong friend.

"It didn't come as some magical biogenetic misfire," Mr. Vachss said. "His roots go deeper than anybody could ever imagine to produce the perfect flower that was Ramón. He built more for the people of New York than Robert Moses ever did."

Mr. Jiménez was running a grass-roots drug rehabilitation program in Queens when he met Mr. Vachss. Arriving at Harvard Law School, he moved in with Mr. Vachss, who ran a program in Cambridge, Mass., to help former convicts re-enter society. At the school, Mr. Jiménez developed a moot court program that Mr. Vachss said eschewed "theoretical nonsense" for actual cases, preparing briefs for use not only in school, but also by prisoners representing themselves in appeals.

Some of the people freed by his efforts visited him as his illness progressed. So did friends and allies from many of the campaigns of his past, including ones against the deal brokered by politicians to build Yankee Stadium as well as the tax incentives offered to Fresh Direct in exchange for relocating its trucks from Queens to the South Bronx.

"You could call him anytime and he would be there," Esperanza Martell, a longtime activist, said. "He was dedicated and full of love. Yes, I am one of many who also challenged him, and he challenged me. We had our differences. But we remained friends. He had integrity."

On his last two birthdays, friends and admirers gathered at Hostos not just to celebrate him, but also to make sure nothing was left unsaid. They praised his leadership during the 1976 protests that saved the school where he had taught for years. New York City, facing a fiscal crisis, had considered closing the community college, a bilingual institution whose student body was overwhelmingly Latino and poor. Now his friends want Hostos to put Mr. Jiménez's name on the bridge over the Grand Concourse that connects its two main buildings.

That would be fitting, because he lived to help others overcome obstacles. In recent years, William Rivera has enjoyed rent-free space in Mr. Jiménez's office, where he seeks construction jobs for minority workers. A mutual friend introduced them in 2007, after Mr. Rivera served 12 years in prison for manslaughter. Mr. Jiménez urged Mr. Rivera to think positively, stay focused and surround himself with good people. Instead, he started dealing drugs on Willis Avenue.

“Ramón saw me there, and for three straight days he showed up,” Mr. Rivera recalled. “I was out there, scrambling, watching my back. He was right there with me, telling my customers to run away. He told them I was selling fake stuff, not to buy it. My boys were like, ‘Yo, what’s up with that?’ Things got to the point that I decided to stop selling drugs.”

Decades earlier, Mr. Jiménez had stood by another young man in turmoil. That man, Ramón Morales, arrived at Harvard in 1972 by way of El Barrio, the Puerto Rican activist group the Young Lords and a mother who toiled in sweatshops. Surrounded by wealth, he felt out of place. Facing the re-election of President Richard M. Nixon, he felt outrage. He had a violent breakdown that November that landed him at the Harvard infirmary, sedated for three days.

“I opened my eyes and was in a kind of stupor,” Mr. Morales said. “And there was a man sitting next to me. Ramón looked at me and said: ‘Hello, my brother. I’ve heard so much about you. When I heard what happened, I came to be by your side.’”

Mr. Morales had been ready to drop out. But Mr. Jiménez persuaded him that the most revolutionary act he could commit would be to stay and get his degree. He did, and went on to become a co-founder of a successful technology company in the South Bronx. He has since sold it and moved on to other ventures that combine technology and social responsibility. He exudes confidence, born not of ego, but of gratitude knowing someone had his back.

“Ramón was there for us,” Mr. Morales said through tears. “He was a loving person with compassion and a great commitment to people.”

As Ramón J. Jiménez lay dying, the final three words he heard in that instant that lasts forever were not “Harvard-educated lawyer” but, simply, “I love you.”