

The star of popular daytime TV, Alex Ferrer gave up a Miami-Dade Circuit judgeship to preside in an even bigger courtroom



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If you ever had the occasion to sit in Judge Alex Ferrer's courtroom while he was on the Miami-Dade Circuit bench, commanding the place with authority, panache and a judicious amount of humor, you might have seen it all coming:

The commentator appearances on cable news shows; the billboards touting him as "Tall, Dark and Judgmental"; the wildly successful syndicated show on daytime TV. Stardom.

And, like just about everything else in his hard-fought career, it all came pretty quickly. Just three years ago, the 46-year-old, homegrown judge was putting away murderers, rapists, armed robbers and serial killers. Now, Ferrer, a cop turned lawyer turned jurist, settles small claims cases.

If this sounds like a demotion, bear in mind that Ferrer now presides in the most formidable courtroom in the country - your living room.

In September, Ferrer will star in Season Three of his popular daytime television show, *Judge Alex*. The series, which airs locally at 1:30 p.m. weekdays on WFLX Fox 29, has been so successful, it has been picked up for a fourth season, which will begin taping next year.

"At first, I was thinking, 'How am I going to adjust to this, to people fighting over a dog bite or a bad wig or a ruined hairstyle?' But to them, it's the most important thing in their life," says Ferrer on a recent afternoon over a soda at a Coral Gables bookstore cafe.

"In most of America, it's the little things that make people feel injustice. It's the cellphone bill they got stuck with, the roommate who destroyed the place and then left, the landlord who dumped their stuff - this is what people fight over. So viewers can relate."

Viewers certainly related quickly to Ferrer when he joined the television court docket in the fall of 2005. His show proved to be the most top-rated daytime launch since Dr. Phil.

Because *Judge Alex* appears in 96 percent of homes across the country, he says, "there's nowhere I can go that I don't run into people I know."

A familiar face

Fame has come with a few jarring realizations. Getting recognized for his work, for instance, has taken on a new meaning now that Ferrer is a TV personality.

"Before, I used to get recognized in Miami by people whose family I sent to prison," he says. "Now, I get recognized all over the country by people who actually like to see me. It's flattering."

He believes the success of courtroom shows like his is rooted in Americans' desire to see that justice is done, even on a small scale, even in a vicarious fashion.

"Everybody loves to see someone who did something wrong get their comeuppance. They long for a sense of justice. It's like when you see some driver shooting by you at 100 miles an hour and get away with it, while you get pulled over. You want to know there is justice," says Ferrer.

Meting out justice has a new set of requirements now for the judge. Because he handles cases from all over the country, he must research the law of each case's place of origin.

"I apply the law of the jurisdiction from where each case originates. That's the hardest part of my job. One day, it's a New York statute for a landlord-tenant dispute, the next one may be a dog-bite case from Texas."

Ferrer does all his legal research before he even steps into the Houston television studio, where *Judge Alex* is taped. He has to - he hears from eight to 10 cases a day without a break.

"I don't have the luxury of saying, 'Come back to me next week on that argument,' or, 'Let's go to recess,'" he says. "The preparation is a tremendous amount of work. I don't go in there and just wing it."

But he does go in there and have fun. He doesn't have to bite his tongue as much as he did while serving on the bench in Miami.

"I can say whatever the heck I want, and I don't have the JQC - the judicial qualifications commission - to worry about," he says with a laugh. "So I can speak my mind, call people out when I think something is absurd, yell at them if I'm angry enough. I don't have to bite my tongue and worry about recusal or anything. That's very liberating."

It doesn't mean he'll tolerate free-for-all gutter fights.

"I don't want my show to be another *Jerry Springer*," says Ferrer, who also mediates and arbitrates civil cases across South Florida. "I run a tight ship."

Dad, the TV star

The TV gig requires Ferrer to commute between his home in Miami and the studio in Houston. He travels every other week during taping season. But although that means he must live out of a suitcase a lot of the time, it also means he can count on more at-home time when he's in Miami.

This was one of the reasons Ferrer took the job - he wanted to spend as much time as he can with his two teenage children, 17-year-old Kristen and 15-year-old Taylor.

"My kids are going to college in a couple of years, so this is the time to spend time together," says Ferrer, who reports that the kids were "thrilled" about his instant stardom.

At first, that is.

"They got over that very quickly. Now, they just say, 'Yeah, Dad, just take out the garbage, wouldja?'" says Ferrer, who has spent his summer days going to the gym with his son and playing their favorite shoot-'em-up computer game, *Counter-Strike*.

Despite the fun and games, Ferrer considers himself an overprotective parent.

"My kids might say I'm too strict. But, you know what, I come from a viewpoint: I have seen the worst of the worst. As a police officer and a judge, I've seen the child molesters and the rapists, the people who beat their girlfriends and boyfriends."

Indeed, Ferrer has seen quite the lineup of perps, first as a young police officer and years later as a criminal court judge. At age 19, he became the youngest cop in the county, patrolling the streets around the University of Miami for the Coral Gables Police Department. But despite his youth, he had already shifted careers once - he had earned his pilot's license at 18 but decided flying planes would be his hobby, not his full-time job.

Carrying a badge at such a young age had its reality-check moments. He could be a police officer, carry a department-issue gun on duty and fire it if necessary. But he couldn't buy a gun because he wasn't old enough.

"So when I had to go buy an off-duty weapon, I had to take my mother," he recalls. "Here I am, big cop, Mr. Cop, at a gun store, going, 'That's the one I want, Mom, could you buy it for me?' "

A cop and budding lawyer

Ferrer came to know his UM-area beat inside and out. Not only did he patrol the neighborhood, he enrolled in law school at the university. He would go to class from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., change into his uniform and work his beat from 4:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m.

On nights he had a lab class, he had the chief's permission to go to class in uniform and wear an earpiece, keeping him tuned in to the station. He'd make up his hours when he got off duty.

It was hard work - "a beast," as he puts it. His work ethic, he says, comes from watching his Cuban exile parents, Eliseo and Elvia Ferrer, work long hours to support him and his two older brothers, Tony and Eddie. The family moved to Miami from Havana in 1961, when Alex was 10 months old.

"They had to start over when they came here. My father always worked extra jobs. Even during his lunch hour, he would run over to this shoe store to sell shoes," says Ferrer, who lost both his brothers when they were in their 20s. In 1975, Tony died of diabetes complications at age 23, and Eddie died of Hodgkin's at age 28 in 1987.

But Alex Ferrer's hard work would pay off. He made law review, a distinction that would help land him a job with a top firm.

Something else happened during that period of nonstop police work and law school. While on traffic duty, he pulled over a car with an expired tag. When he got to the driver's window and looked in, he was taken aback:

"Jane!"

It was an old friend from his undergraduate days at Miami-Dade College, where he had taken criminal law classes. During a mock trial in class once, he had been picked to play judge, and she had played court reporter.

"Alex!" the driver came back, happy to see him.

"You know your tag's expired?" he told her.

"No, it's not."

"Let me show you."

He was right. She was impressed.

"Shortly after that, we started dating," he says.

Personal gratification

Upon graduation, Ferrer was hired by the late attorney general of Florida, Bob Shevin, to work at his law firm. A few years later, he opened his own civil law firm.

"But by then, I knew I didn't want to be a lawyer the rest of my life," says Ferrer. "I missed the personal gratification you get as a cop. When I was a cop, I felt I was wearing the white hat, trying to do the right thing."

Hoping to recapture that feeling, he ran for and won a seat on the 11th Judicial Circuit Court. He was only 34 at the time, the youngest circuit judge in the state. During his tenure, Ferrer would preside over some notorious cases.

One of his first big cases was the 1998 trial of the two murderous bodybuilders, convicted of killing and dismembering a wealthy couple and stuffing their remains in 55-gallon drums. Ferrer gave both men the death sentence.

One of his last big cases was that of Kirk Douglas Billie, the Miccosukee Indian convicted of killing his two young sons, ages 3 and 5. Angry at his girlfriend, the man rolled her SUV into a canal, then watched it as it sank. In 2005, Ferrer sentenced Billie to life in prison.

Ferrer had been on the bench for 10 years when the TV opportunity came up. Executives at 20th Television, Fox's syndication division, were so impressed by his no-nonsense manner and his on-screen charisma, they offered him a show.

While Ferrer knew venturing into television would be risky, he says he was ready for the adventure. And, as the reality of college tuition for his kids looms in the near future, he was also ready for the fatter paycheck. So he resigned from his job as associate administrative judge for the Miami-Dade Circuit and headed for TV land.

Kudos and headaches

His success quickly brought him more screen time, as a commentator on CNN, Fox News and other cable outlets. Channel-surf in the wee hours, and you may find him on CNN's *Showbiz Tonight* or Fox News' *Red Eye*, taking questions about everything from Anna Nicole Smith to Paris Hilton.

So, in addition to reading the obscure statutes of remote jurisdictions, he also peruses celebrity sites like TMZ.com.

"Yeah, it feels funny, but I can't go on a show and not know what I'm talking about," says Ferrer.

The fame has also brought him his share of headaches, like the lawsuit from the Miami lawyer who claims he's entitled to 12 percent of Ferrer's TV pay because he once was his talent manager, *The Miami Herald* reported in June.

Ferrer says the lawyer, Arnold Preston, tried to sign him to a TV show years before *Judge Alex* went on the air.

"We never did that show. I walked away," Ferrer says. "Two years later, I get approached to do a different show. Now he feels he should get a piece of that one, and it's absolutely untrue. He shouldn't. But he wants to litigate over it, so I'm stuck in litigation. It's a pain."

That's the kind of annoyance that reminds Ferrer he's no longer a low-key judge on the circuit bench.

While it may not be enough to lure him back to criminal court, there is something he misses about the old days.

"I miss the personal satisfaction of locking away really bad people," says Ferrer, "because there are some really, really bad people."

Judge Alex's view of the world ...

On O.J. Simpson peddling a book titled 'If I Did It':

'He was found guilty civilly. I don't think he should be able to profit from something a civil jury said he did. Personally, I think it's reprehensible. I think he's in his own hell.'

(O.J. is actually a neighbor of his.)

On 'celebutante' Paris Hilton's going to jail - was it fair?

'Yeah, it was fair. I wouldn't have treated her any differently than anyone else. I'd have said, "You kidding me? You pled guilty. You're on probation. This is what you're supposed to do. If you violate your probation, you get sentenced like the original crime." Probation simply means, "You're going to prove to me that this was an aberration and you're going to follow the law." I wouldn't punish her more for being a celebrity, but I wouldn't punish her less. There are a lot of people in jail who have anxiety, breathing disorders, and we don't say, "We'll go ahead and let you go home." '

On President Bush commuting Scooter Libby's sentence:

'Frankly, I think the presidential pardon power should be eliminated. It's like saying there's a separate level of justice for the people that the president likes. We have a judicial system for a reason. You can't say, "Yeah, we have a great judicial system, but we're gonna let this guy decide the judge was wrong." I didn't like it when Clinton did it, either. Clinton did 140 of them. It was like Christmas Day at the White House.'

On the weepy Judge Larry Seidlin, the Broward circuit judge who presided over the Anna Nicole Smith case:

'I would hate to evaluate a judge based on one case, especially that case. Everybody has a bad day. Everybody has a bad case. But would I cry on the bench? No. Not my style. I was on MSNBC, and they really wanted me to rip him, and I said, "I'm not going to rip him. He's different. But he doesn't abuse anybody, doesn't mistreat anybody." '

On the feud between Rosie O'Donnell and The Donald:

'I don't think I would pick a fight with either of them.'

On Michael Moore's getting slammed with a fine by the Treasury Department for unauthorized travel to Cuba:

'We have laws - you change them, or you live by them. If you go to Cuba, and you know you're not allowed to go over there, then I hope the fine is huge. I have no doubt he went over there knowing he was going to get fined. So this shouldn't be a slap on the wrist. I think fines should be commensurate with the benefit the person is getting.'

On the state of politics:

'Politics have gotten so dirty on both sides. It never used to be this bad. It hurts the country. They don't focus on what's good for the U.S. They focus on, "Oh, they want it? Then we don't." Meanwhile, the rest of us are getting screwed. The last thing in the world I ever want to do is be a politician.'

On Fort Lauderdale Mayor Jim Naugle and his idea to install robo-toilets as a deterrent to gay sex in public bathrooms:

'Does he own stock in this company or something? I can't imagine that if he told his mother, "You're gonna be using a public toilet, and if you take too long, Mom, the door is going to spring open on you," that she wouldn't hit him on the head with a shoe.'