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Taking on Obamacare's Contraception Mandate



Kristina Arriaga, executive director of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty. (Courtesy of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty)



By Christopher Snow Hopkins
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In the early 1960s, **Kristina Arriaga's** father was a destitute Cuban refugee living in Miami. The penniless émigré scrimped and saved so that he and his wife could feast on pancakes and sausage links at a nearby International House of Pancakes.

"That was my father's dream," said Arriaga, executive director of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty.

Inside the restaurant, her father ordered the 99-cent all-you-can-eat special in muddled English. When the waitress returned to the table with a mug of root beer and a slice of apple pie, Arriaga's father decided at that moment that the family would move to Puerto Rico.

Notwithstanding the travails of her father, Arriaga not only speaks flawless English but has assimilated fully into American society as head of a well-regarded public-interest law firm. The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty has received media attention of late for its advocacy on behalf of the owners of Hobby Lobby, a craft-store chain, who are seeking an exemption from the Affordable Care Act's contraception mandate on the grounds that it violates their religious freedom. The Supreme Court is expected to decide later this month whether to hear the case.

At the Becket Fund, Arriaga's role is to "crystallize" legal concepts for the general public, she said. "I'm a communicator, not a

lawyer." Although the law firm has been embraced by the conservative establishment, the Becket Fund does not take a position on highly charged issues like abortion. "We like to say we represent cases from Anglican to Zoroastrian."

Raised in Puerto Rico, Arriaga was inculcated by her parents with a love of all things Cuba. "My childhood was completely abnormal," she said, with a laugh. "I grew up eating Cuban food, reading the Cuban encyclopedia, and singing the Cuban national anthem every day at 4 in the afternoon."

"My father thought his exit would always be temporary, so he spoke with great passion about returning to Cuba to fight for freedom. He was hoping the Fidel Castro regime would only last a couple years."

After graduating from Marquette University, Arriaga was hired by the Cuban American National Foundation in Washington. "I thought that if my father couldn't go back to Cuba and liberate it then it was my job to do so," she said.

Later, Arriaga served as an aide and interpreter for Armando Valladares, U.S. ambassador to what is now the United Nations Human Rights Commission. She would at times accompany him to the Oval Office, where her duties extended to amplification. "I didn't realize [President Reagan] was already deaf at the time, so I wasn't just translating, I was yelling."

In the early 1990s, Arriaga vaulted into the public consciousness when she helped stage an airplane rescue of a family in Cuba. About a year before, a MiG-23 pilot had defected from the troubled Communist regime. With \$35,000 from a donor, Arriaga purchased a twin-engine Cessna, which the defector then flew to Cuba and landed on a coastal highway where his wife and two children were waiting. The incident, which was chronicled by *Vanity Fair* and *Reader's Digest*, had direct consequences for Arriaga: Shortly thereafter, her car was set on fire in the middle of the night.

In the latter half of her career, Arriaga served as an official at the Department of Housing and Urban Development under then-Secretary Jack Kemp, followed by a four-year appointment to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. She joined the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty 17 years ago.

The 49-year-old, who holds a master's degree in liberal studies from Georgetown University, is married and lives with her three children in Alexandria, Va.

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