

## Judge Has Had at Least Nine Lives, Plans to Keep on

### Having Worked on Six Continents, She Settles in To Preside in El Centro

**By Don Ray**

Daily Journal Staff Writer

EL CENTRO — Imperial Superior Court Judge Annie M. Gutierrez has never worked in Antarctica.

But she's worked on every other continent, and she's worn a lot of hats.

Gutierrez has helped the poor with sanitation and health issues from Mexico to South America, she's trained prosecutors and defense attorneys in Africa, and she's worked alongside scientists in the rain forests of Australia, the deserts of Peru, the Sea of Cortez and at study sites throughout Europe and Asia.

She's tracked down smugglers in Mexico, interviewed political prisoners in Cuba, overseen the union elections of farmworkers in the San Joaquin Valley and even advised the president of the United States on civil rights issues and domestic policy.

Today, Gutierrez presides over criminal matters on the first floor of the old courthouse in El Centro, 14 miles north of Mexico and 52 feet below sea level.

In that very courthouse, Gutierrez first gained a reputation as a fierce advocate for victims of police brutality, and as a prosecutor, she brought down big-time smugglers and drug dealers.

That experience is obvious, attorneys said, in the way she runs her courtroom.

"She's patient, smart and savvy," San Diego attorney Donald L. Levine said.

"Her experience as a trial attorney shows up as a judge because she steps in only when it's necessary and lets the attorneys try their cases," Levine said.

Deputy District Attorney Jonathan L. Willis said he was instantly impressed with Gutierrez's knowledge of the law,

especially when it comes to evidence.

Plus, Willis said, she shows a great respect for attorneys and defendants alike, especially defendants without an attorney.

"Some of the judges I've seen in other venues will take an air of pomposity," Willis said, "but that's not Annie Gutierrez. Annie is very much the opposite of an authoritarian figure."

His advice to attorneys new to her courtroom is not to be long-winded.

"Make your arguments short and sweet," Willis said, "and you don't need to lecture her 'cause she'll know the law."

Gutierrez came to know the law more out of necessity and opportunity than desire. Her only dream as a child was to help her father on the farm. The uneducated Basque sheepherder had emigrated from Spain when he was 16.

"I was going to help him raise the sheep until he couldn't do it any longer," Gutierrez said, "and then I would keep doing it."

When she was born, family legend has it, her father was so upset she wasn't a boy that he told everyone he was going home to feed the chickens.

"Having heard that story many, many times, I guess in my mind I had to prove to him that I could be as good as any boy," Gutierrez said, "so I was at his side constantly."

When she was 11, folks at the local 4H club noticed her ovine obsession, recruited her and challenged her to compete against other young aggies.

Gutierrez answered the challenge with an insatiable appetite for knowledge and a competitive determination that eventually earned her the nation's highest 4H award.

As her successes piled up, she talked her way into getting her own 4H radio program and began competing in student speaking competitions through the Toastmasters, she said.

She began winning, even though she had never taken a speech class.

Her teachers convinced Gutierrez and her parents that she should go to college and leave raising sheep to her father. Besides, she said, colleges were offering her scholarships because of her accomplishments and her high marks.

Pomona College President E. Wilson Lyon heard one of her scholarship acceptance speeches and was so impressed that he opened his doors to her.

That summer, Gutierrez went with a church group to the remote village of Tlaxcala, Mexico, where she taught school and ran a latrine-building program.

Seeing such poverty re-ignited memories of similar conditions she had witnessed when she was 10 on a family trip to Spain following the civil war there.

While she was in college, she traveled to Central and South America as a consultant for the U.S. Technical Assistance Program. She trained locals in health, sanitation and community development.

She graduated with honors in 1960 with a bachelor's degree in international relations and, a year later, got her master's degree in international relations and economics from Claremont Graduate School.

That year, President Kennedy took office and formed the Peace Corps. Gutierrez was one of its early staff members.



**Annie M. Gutierrez**  
Superior Court Judge  
Imperial (El Centro)

She developed and managed programs for five South American countries, she said, and then directed field-training programs in Puerto Rico for volunteers.

She worked closely with the agency's director, Sargent Shriver.

"He was one of the finest human beings I have ever known and the best boss one could ever hope for," Gutierrez said.

By the time she had returned to the Imperial Valley, she was married and had a daughter. When Gutierrez's husband became disabled, she looked for work.

"The one job I thought I would like was the judgeship in the Westmorland Judicial District," Gutierrez said.

She passed the required written test to qualify for a position as a lay judge in the community, but the county supervisors turned her down because she might become pregnant, she said.

At the same time, the newly enacted Economic Opportunities Act had earmarked money for community develop-

