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by joboyd

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Barbara Bernal Monnroy arrived in the United States from her native Venezuela at the age of 16, with no practical English language knowledge or skills. “Generation Zero,” as she puts it. Though she was a year behind because of the language barrier, Monnroy worked tirelessly to succeed, eventually graduating from a Florida high school with strong enough credentials to earn a place at Davis & Elkins College. She succeeded there, too, in rural West Virginia, earning valedictorian honors and serving as the college’s graduation speaker.

Monnroy was the first person in her family to earn one degree, let alone three—she majored in criminology, political science, and, of all things, English—from a United States college or university. And she broke another barrier in her family’s history when she applied to and enrolled in the Indiana University Maurer School of Law as a 1L in the fall of 2022.

That incredible journey—from non-native English speaker to second-year law student in the span of six years, is one Monnroy and her family are understandably proud of. But she’s not stopping there.
In August 2023, Monnroy helped launch the First Generation Law Students Association, creating a central network of support and camaraderie for students just like her who are the first in their families to attend an institution of higher education.

Monnroy said she had attended First Generation lunches—biannual events that bring together FirstGen students once a semester—put on by the Law School, but wanted to do more.

“I think we can do a lot more to create a community,” she said. “I noticed that a lot of FirstGen students are not in affinity groups, and affinity groups are where you have your people, your community. I noticed the FirstGen students didn’t have something just for them, so I wanted to involve people with different backgrounds, from different socioeconomic statuses, from different everything, really.”

Enter the FGLA.

In its first month of existence, the organization has drawn the interest of more than two-dozen First Generation students, with more expected to join as word of the group’s formation spreads.

Supporting the needs of First Generation students is a growing trend around the country. When the Law School’s Class of 2026 began orientation the second week of August, Professor Don Gjerdingen—himself a FirstGen graduate and now the FGLA faculty advisor—gave a moving speech to the roughly 20 percent of the incoming class that are First Generation students. Gjerdingen recalled his own inspirational path from a working-class family in Minnesota to law professor.

Monnroy said the FGLA plans to host multiple events this coming year, including meet-and-greets with the student body, bring in external speakers, and meetings with FirstGen Law School alumni to forge a bond between the two communities. That connection played out in Monnroy’s first summer internship with the Hon. Jose Rodriguez ’80—another FirstGen graduate—in Miami.

“Being supportive of each other is the most important part of what we want to do,” she said. “We want to help as many people as we can, and provide whatever resources we can to help make them successful in their law school careers.”