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Jeffrey Mitchell

Position: The Cochran Firm Metairie owner and managing partner

Age: 46

Family: wife, Monica Sanchez; children, Emily, 16, Andrew 15, Catherine, 13, Henry, 12

Education: bachelor's degree in business administration, Louisiana State University; juris doctor, LSU Paul M. Hebert School of Law

Surveying the growing Hispanic population of greater New Orleans, Jeffrey Mitchell is concerned that immigrants from Latin America are falling outside of the legal system.

"The Constitution protects all people, not (just) all citizens," said Mitchell, owner and chairman of the medical malpractice section for The Cochran Firm's Metairie office, where he serves as a member of the firm's national executive committee.

"That means that if you are in this country from someplace else but are not legal, no one has a right to take advantage of you," Mitchell said.

To that end, Mitchell and his wife, Monica Sanchez, who is also an attorney and native of Panama, have been devoted to reaching out to local Hispanic residents, letting them know about their rights and, in many cases, offering free legal advice.

"I think we should be thankful that so many of these people have moved here in the wake of Katrina to help us rebuild our city," Mitchell said. "This is a group that in the next few years is going to make up the largest minority population in the United States, which is all the more reason for us to make sure they have the full protection of the courts in their legal affairs."

Mitchell and Sanchez often spend their weekends going to local Hispanic festivals and other cultural events, setting up a booth and talking to attendees about their legal rights. They have also gone to work on the issue of getting more certified interpreters into local courts.

"A lot can get lost in the courtroom if you don't have a certified interpreter trained in specific languages," he said. "So we are trying to make this a more visible issue in the hope that the courts will respond."

Mitchell is additionally working with his wife on a campaign called "Know Your Rights," which is geared toward the Hispanic community but applies to any non-American resident.

"It is a matter of realizing that just because someone is a citizen of another country, that does not mean they have no rights here. Our courts and legal system are open to anyone who has suffered an injustice. We are just trying to make more people aware of that."

Practicing in the areas of product liability, maritime law, premises liability and automobile accidents, Mitchell is one of only a dozen lawyers in Louisiana who are board certified in medical malpractice cases by the American Board of Professional Liability Attorneys. •

— Garry Boulard