

TOGETHER

a monthly bulletin insert from the archdiocese



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May 2023 Vol. 3 | No. 6

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WHEN I WAS A STRANGER, YOU WELCOMED ME

An interview with Ry Meyer, Immigration Attorney with Catholic Charities

By Cassie Bird

Ry Meyer is a Dubuque native who grew up in the Catholic school system – attending Sacred Heart for grade school and then graduating from Wahlert High School. After attending Clarke University for college, he enlisted in the United States Navy for 6 years, which he says gave him a global kind of understanding outside of the confines of growing up in Dubuque. Following the Navy, Ry went to law school, and then practiced as an attorney doing prosecutorial work. When it was time



for a change, he came on board to Catholic Charities in 2018. He describes finding his niche in immigration law, which he believes is one of the great civil rights questions of our age.

What qualities are important to possess as an immigration legal services attorney?

I think you have to balance empathy and understanding against solid, evidence-based legal analysis. We want to help everyone who has a tough situation, and we get a lot of nuanced issues and consultations where your heart wants to help but you have to apply the law. Some situations are really sad; a lot of them are very sad.

I'm a Navy veteran, and the security of our country and the solidity of our borders matters to me. I swore an oath to uphold our

Constitution, values and laws, and I was also a criminal prosecutor. So people following the law, and breaks being given only when the law allows and it's judicious to do so, is also something that appeals to me. Our program certainly welcomes this mindset. I think that's something our immigration system aspires to allow, and that's something we're trying to do at Catholic Charities – we're actually making our borders stronger by helping people follow a legal path.

What does your work look like on a daily/weekly basis as an immigration attorney?

I do a lot of paperwork because the federal government is a bureaucracy and bureaucracies love to generate paperwork. Some of it's very interesting when you're compiling evidentiary exhibits and peoples' biographies. Some of it is very repetitive, filling in similar boxes on similar forms. That's a lot of our days. But you never quite know what type of situation is going to come through the door.

People may be surprised to learn that many unaccompanied minors come to our borders asking for help because they've been abandoned, abused or neglected in their own country. There may actually be immigration relief for them and packages available for them, and many of those situations are time sensitive. Not just unaccompanied minors, although that's usually where I encounter this, but sometimes you have situations of urgent assistance and that can really cause the haystack of paperwork to get shoved to the side and get laser-focused on one project.

And hopefully in the end, all of that paperwork leads to a good resolution for the client.

Well yes, we're selling hope, but also realistic hope. Because I think there are some who believe just by filing something and telling someone it will work will help someone. But that doesn't help someone unless there's a solid legal basis for it. That's why our free consultations are very important to give people a realistic view of what their options are. We need to balance providing realistic services against those who would sell the intoxicating mix of false hope.

I worry about the people who bog down our system filing things, just on the hope that maybe it will pass muster – I would prefer they come to us for a free consultation so we can tell them if they don't have an option. Then they should probably consider possibly returning to their home country. And if they do have an option to move forward, even if it's like I say, just a bunch of paperwork, or if it's something time sensitive and urgent, we want to be able to provide that service and get the approval notice at the end of the day that puts them on a legal path or maintains the legal path that they already have because that's the bulk of our clients.

Do you perform many consultations personally? Or how does that work?

We perform numerous consultations a week. One of the reasons people should donate to us is that there is such a tremendous need. For the last several months, I've assisted coverage in Waterloo and in Cedar Rapids, because those offices are already at capacity. I'm close to capacity. For all of us, immigrant community is comprised of our friends, neighbors, and parishioners. They need assistance, and there are not enough immigration services providers.

There are very few immigration providers for the population that needed assistance. And many of those people in that population do meet our criteria for when we're helping them, we're helping to fulfill our goals of poverty reduction, keeping families together, and helping people who otherwise would not be able to access help. But the few [private] attorneys who are around sometimes do have to charge more due to the fact that they are not operating as nonprofit organizations, which can create barriers for potential clients.

Can you talk about one of the most impactful moments during your practice of immigration law?

As I said, I assist a lot of unaccompanied minors establishing legal status for themselves, and that's a very long process. It takes several years for them to get legal permanent resident status and there are several steps in between. They have to stay here during that process and they have to

remain in guardianship, which is supervision by our local court, while I work on their immigration stuff.

A couple of years ago, I had a young man who fled extreme poverty in Guatemala after his family could not take care of him, and he had been abandoned. When this kid came to the U.S., I recognized he was intelligent, really charismatic, and had a very winning personality. You could tell he was struggling with being far from home, not fitting in, and adjusting. Like many abandoned youth, there was a temptation to leave our program and its responsibilities and get sucked into an irresponsible lifestyle. While I liked this kid, at first I kind of dreaded hearing the next piece of news about him. I worried he might feel overwhelmed by his responsibilities here and grief from familial abandonment, and end up making choices that might lead to him having difficulties. But thankfully I was wrong about that.

About a year into his program, I called his guardian about some minor paperwork. But, he had reached a turning point. His English was to a point that he was conversational. His grades had dramatically improved in school. He had made a lot of friends, and was friends with everybody. He's on the soccer team, he loves it, he's asking his guardian what kind of Christmas presents he should buy for his teachers. Even his counselor at school said this is like a totally different kid.

And right after that, we were able to apply for and obtain his work authorization and get him a social security card. So he was able to get insurance, and his guardian's parents were getting rid of their old car, so he was buying their old car. It all happened right around Christmas, and it was really heartwarming that I had this moment where I was really happy for this kid. He had turned a corner and he had a ton of friends and was doing well and right on the heels of that he was able to get his insurance and work authorization and get himself driving.

It just goes to show the sort of effect that we serve our clients who come from a place where they have left everything - not all of them, but some of them have left everything. They've plunged themselves into a world where they don't know how things work and they're really apprehensive about the future. They have no privileges, rights, benefits, their family is far away, but with the stability that comes from our services and the things that we can provide them, they can really turn a corner.

How are guardians determined by the local courts?

The kids really have to find their own guardian. We're always interested in people

who would like to volunteer to be a guardian, because if we know someone, sometimes we can connect them, but that's not the thing we typically do. All guardians go through a background check with the court. Sometimes kids pick teachers or other adults they know.

Another sort of heartwarming story is when I started in 2018, one of the first kids that I helped was an unaccompanied minor, and he got his Green Card - that means he's a legal permanent resident - so he's on track to become a citizen if he wants in the couple of years, but he's a legal permanent resident and he can keep that status forever if he wants. And he now is guardian to a young unaccompanied minor who showed up in Dubuque and was from his same country and speaks the same indigenous language. He wants to pay it forward and be guardian for that kid. So, I think that's really cool.

He's not the only one, but he's the only one that I have helped from start to finish in this process, but we do have others who are now strengthening that community. They are assimilating into the US, but also bringing a unique cultural and historical perspective from their home countries.

You've touched on this a little already, but is there anything you would add to the challenges of being in immigration law?

We have a lot of programs that would make sense to put into place, but that just don't seem to come to be. For example, an Afghan Adjustment Act, that would provide a legal path forward to the people who have assisted our military and share United States values, and actually promoted our values in the face of war in their home country, now are disenfranchised. We brought them here, but there's no path forward for them. Now what? I think there's broad political consensus that we should do something, but we haven't yet.

I think the recipients of the DACA program are similar. They had absolutely no say, they were children, in the manner in which they ended up in the United States. The fact of it is, they grew up here as little children. They are now young adults. They have gone to our schools, have graduated from college many of them, and want to work and participate in our economy. They don't want to take, they want to give. They truly are a part of the fabric of our community. They have never known another country. I think they are a population for which everyone agrees we should provide a path forward, but right now the program itself is a problem. The people are a huge benefit, why not make the program a benefit as well and give them a path forward instead of a future of uncertainty?

An example of where we've done things right is the Uniting for Ukraine Program. Where very quickly, in response to a catastrophe, the

United States put together a program which people can quickly, legally access to the United States and not to avail themselves to further government - you know, they're not coming here to soak up our resources, they're coming here willing to contribute in the face of a humanitarian disaster for which many reasons we should welcome them here. The program seems to be working very well

What do you wish more people knew about Immigration Legal Services or immigration law?

I think that there is a perceived difference a lot of people have between people "of the US" and "others." That there's this perception in some people that language and cultural barriers are vast and that the difference between "us" that live here, and "them" that live outside some arbitrary boundary on a map, are different and therefore threatening in some way. But the reality of it is, we all share the same goals and desires. We all want safety and stability. We all want to contribute to our communities. One of the things that we recognize with Catholic Charities is the importance of family and keeping families together, and for immigrants, for a lot of them, that's all they have are their families, because our system is so difficult to access.

Once you get past that false perception that there's this vast gulf or difference, it makes it very easy to follow the line in the gospel that we always go back to. Specifically, what Jesus says in Matthew 25 when the apostles ask, what do you want us to do? Well, when I was naked you clothed me, when I was a stranger you welcomed me, when I was homeless you gave me shelter. But then they ask, but when did we do that for you? And Jesus says, when you did it for the least of my people, you did it for me. So it makes it easy to follow that particular verse when you realize the perception of difference between "us" and "them," is really just a matter of perception, warped by a sense of history. Jesus accepts us all, He doesn't discriminate.

Thanks to the generous support of those in the archdiocese, Catholic Charities is able to offer their immigration legal services at a reduced rate or sometimes even at no-cost, based upon the client's income. Consultations are always offered for free. Thank you for your support which makes this important work possible, and is the only program of its kind in the Archdiocese of Dubuque

ArchdioceseOne Update

Thanks to your sacrificial gift, over \$15.2 million has been raised for the ArchdioceseOne special appeal. Over \$7.6 million of this amount has been left unrestricted, and over \$1.07 million has been restricted to Immigration Legal Services.