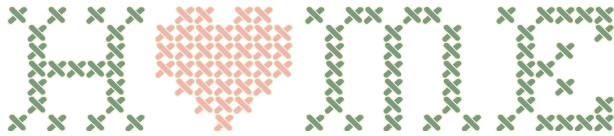


# Securing a new



Cozen O'Connor attorneys work pro bono to help mother and son earn asylum in United States

By Melissa Rubalcaba Riske

**W**inning the case for a client is always an important goal. But sometimes it's a matter of life or death.

Cozen O'Connor attorneys Matthew DiCianni and Amy Doig understood that if they failed to win a judgment for their clients' request for asylum it would mean deportation to a country where their lives would be at grave risk.

"Our clients, a young single mother and her 10-year-old son, were threatened with torture and death if her son refused to join a gang that regularly recruits young male children," Doig said. "Instead of facing almost certain violence, she chose to seek asylum in the United States."

The case went to immigration court in November where the attorneys won and secured asylum in a pro bono case that spanned six years. The client, with her now 16-year-old son, was overjoyed when the verdict was read in the courtroom, DiCianni said.

"One of the most amazing moments was as the asylum was granted. She burst into tears and thanked the judge and thanked us," DiCianni said. "Just to see the gratitude in her, she knew how hard we fought and that her life would be safe."

## LEGAL PURSUIT

Doig was still a new hire with Cozen O'Connor when presented with the opportunity to tackle this pro bono case.

"I thought of it as a great opportunity to work on a case by myself," Doig said.

She felt a connection to immigration issues because she helped her husband with his immigration from Ireland. But Doig knew this case would be much different.

Just hours after Doig's future client and her son were threatened, they fled to the United States. With only the clothes on their backs, the pair left behind close family members and journeyed to the United States on foot, by car, bus and even a raft.

DiCianni, who joined the case while Doig was on maternity leave, had previously lived and taught in Honduras. He personally observed the stronghold of gangs in Central America.

"I witnessed first-hand the power of the gangs and the weakness of the police and state," DiCianni said.

During court arguments, DiCianni cited *W.G.A. v. Sessions*, a case of an asylum seeker from El Salvador who fled the country after a gang member held a gun to his head and threatened to kill him. The seeker's brother had been kidnapped and forced to join the gang. The brother escaped, but the gang threatened the petitioner, in an attempt to persuade the brother to return to the gang. DiCianni argued his client was similarly threatened for refusing to allow her son to join the gang.

Doig said the client's pursuit of asylum is marked by following every step and request along the way during a six-year odyssey, including weekly check-ins with immigration officers.

"That was very important to her, not to sneak in, but to do it the right way," Doig said.

Asylum cases can take years to wind through the courts and some seekers give up or slip out of the system. The COVID pandemic delayed this case as well.

"She has so much gratitude for our country," Doig said. "She was absolutely willing to go along with the process."

## FIRM BACKS ITS ATTORNEYS

DiCianni and Doig were grateful to Cozen O'Connor for its support, resources and allowing them the time needed to win the case. For associates looking for experience in front of judges, pro bono cases allow attorneys to interview witnesses, craft arguments and spend valuable time in the courtroom.

"The client is getting a lot of value and the lawyers are getting a lot of experience. It's



Amy Doig



*Cozen O'Connor associate Matthew DiCianni (center) with the mother and son that he and colleague Amy Doig helped earn asylum in the United States. The case, done pro bono by the two attorneys, lasted more than six years. — Photo courtesy of Cozen O'Connor*

kind of win-win for all," said Jim Argionis, Cozen O'Connor member who serves as a firm liaison to its partnership with the National Immigrant Justice Center.

Argionis was drawn to the NIJC's work when he sought pro bono opportunities for Cozen's Chicago office. He also was inspired by his parents' stories of immigration.

"Both my parents immigrated from Greece," he said, adding how his parents, as young adults, traveled individually to the United States. They would later meet and settle in the Chicago area.

"They wanted a better life and to pursue the American dream," he said. "That's what inspired me to get involved with immigration."

Navigating immigration law can be challenging and NIJC provides case referrals and ongoing support, Argionis said. DiCianni is a part of the labor and employment department while Doig is in the commercial

litigation department. Their days are filled with contracts and business disputes. They both value and appreciate the experience, inspiration and gratifying moments that come from pro bono work.

"It's a lot of work," Doig said. "It's a lot of your time, but your motivation in doing it is knowing you are changing somebody's life."

Argionis believes a case like this one can help attorneys reconnect with the excitement that initially drew them to the legal profession.

"Cases like this energize the office," Argionis said.

Although tackling pro bono cases may offer opportunities to stretch one's legal muscles and gain valuable experience, they come with responsibility, Argionis said.

"We have an obligation in our profession to make sure we're doing what we can and our service is put out there for the greater good," he said.

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