

Coming to America

Immigration Specialist Joseph Curran Has Successfully Filled a Legal Niche

BY JOSEPH BEDNAR

Joseph Curran never wanted to spend his legal career slogging through criminal cases or divorce proceedings — he wanted to help people and make a difference. The rapidly changing world of immigration law provided just that opportunity.

Joseph Curran tells the story of a Pakistani woman from a Muslim family who fell in love with a Christian man in America. After four years in the states, she returned home to a decidedly cool reception. In fact, she was in effect imprisoned by her family, which wasn't thrilled about the marriage plans.

But with the help of some Baptist missionaries, she escaped her town and was smuggled to an American embassy. But her excursion back to the U.S. was just starting, as she had next to face the red tape of the American immigration system — which has grown stickier since 9/11.

That's where attorneys like Curran come in. Joseph Curran Associates, based in Northampton, specializes in immigration law — most of the time working for businesses trying to bring in skilled help from overseas, but sometimes working on behalf of people like this Pakistani woman, who lives in New Hampshire with her new American husband.

"We've seen dreams shattered, and we've seen dreams come true," said Curran, who is celebrating 20 years in practice this year. And it's the human element, the real-life drama of helping people navigate the complexities of the immigration system, that gives him the desire to come to work every morning.

"I have the best job in the world," Curran said. "It's absolutely more fun to tell friends I helped a family of refugees get into this country than that I got a big tort settlement or



Joseph Curran says immigration has become more difficult post-9/11, but the environment should eventually return to normal.

helped a family get divorced."

Something Different

Early on in his career, Curran realized his path would not lead him to fields such as divorce, real estate, or criminal law. Soon after graduating from Western New England College Law School, he bumped into an immigration lawyer from Boston, and he was intrigued by the possibilities.

"I was working for a very large firm in D.C., Steptoe & Johnson, and I decided I definitely didn't want to work in such a large firm, with all the bureaucracy, politics, and the feeling that I wasn't serving anyone — it was just billable hours," he said. "I wanted to contribute to society in some way."

So he learned the immigration ropes — and "starved" at first, as he put it — putting himself to sleep on many nights while immersing himself in federal codes and regulations. In fact, he said, immigration law ranks alongside international tax law as one

of the most complicated legal niches.

"If you don't like reading federal regulations, you can't do this job," he said. "But I'm a geek and politically oriented, so I enjoy it."

A large part of Curran's business is helping colleges and universities bring in professors and other employees — fertile ground in an area marked by so many well-regarded institutions of higher learning.

"Everyone wants to come to the U.S., but there are a lot of hoops to jump through," he said. "I help schools bring in professors and get them visas."

He also works with businesses, from Northeast Utilities and Top-Flite to smaller firms, who want to bring in talent from overseas. In all, the firm has about 200 academic and business clients in addition to its family and refugee work.

Computer technology has changed the way Curran does his job over the years. In fact, electronic communications mean he often never sees a client, communicating

more with the human resources department trying to hire him or her on.

The political aspect of immigration is constantly in flux as well, but never so much as in the days following the 9/11 terrorist attacks — an event that turned the immigration world upside down.

"What we have now is a 'culture of no,'" Curran said. "Before, if you asked for immigration benefits — employment authorization, a visa, a visit from your wife — they would see if you were eligible. There was an open mind. Now, at U.S. embassies and at the borders, the atmosphere is, 'no, you can't have it.'"

"Everyone is worried. They're afraid they'll be the one who lets in the wrong person," he continued, adding, "you don't want to be named Muhammad if you're trying to get into the U.S."

This atmosphere of paranoia, as Curran termed it, has created a culture in immigration where it's always acceptable to say 'no' to an applicant — "no one gets in trouble for turning down a visa request."

And that culture doesn't apply only to prospective newcomers to America. Curran cited the example of a Smith College professor who hails from Egypt. He had been teaching here for years, regularly traveling back and forth between Massachusetts and his homeland, when on one occasion he was delayed for several months for a series of background checks.

"Justice delayed is justice denied," Curran said, noting that when companies call on foreign scientists or engineers, they often need them *now*, not after a lengthy bureaucratic delay. "A lot of them will then say, 'don't bother.'"

The cycle will eventually reverse and the restrictions ease up, he said, although it's hard to say just when. Although the Bush administration is on a wartime footing when it comes

Staff Photo

to letting people into the country, Curran explained, it's also pro-business, and in a global economy, American and foreign business people need to travel back and forth.

"I don't know how long it will be before we come around to a more sane perspective," he said, "but you can't stop business."

Healthy Outlook

While businesses have been challenged in recent years to bring foreign workers on board, the health care industry has seen an even more alarming development — the aging of the nursing workforce nationally and a growing shortage of nurses.

Curran had been working with recruiters to speed up the process of

bringing foreign nurses to America, but, disheartened with what he called the "lack of professionalism" in the recruiting process, he decided to cut out the middleman. His second business, Kennedy Healthcare, was launched last year with the goal of recruiting overseas nurses. In that capacity, he has worked with area hospitals, including Baystate Medical Center, Mercy Medical Center, and Cooley Dickinson Hospital.

"I started the business with people I know and trust, with ethical standards," he said. "We get nurses to come here, and then they need visas, so it all works together."

The business, which also has an office in India, has recruited nurses

from that country, as well as the Philippines, Lebanon, the Ukraine, and other lands. "They see an opportunity to improve their lives, and to get to the U.S. is the goal for almost all of them," Curran said. "This is the dream land."

If juggling both businesses — which together employ 13 people — isn't too much of a strain, that's partly because Curran enjoys his work so much. Despite the challenges the field poses, his enthusiasm is frankly infectious.

"It's a blast," he said, lauding the variety of the work, the teamwork in his office, and the satisfaction of doing a job that ultimately helps other people achieve better lives.

He was quick to add that the

work can sometimes be depressing, citing a Rwandan family whose father met a brutal death during the genocide of the 1990s. The family members were smuggled out of the country — one in a coffin — and their written affidavit, detailing their experiences, was enough to draw tears. But they're safely in America now, with two currently attending UMass.

And it's endings like that one that keep Curran going.

"I'm a bit of an idealist," he said. "This is the greatest country in the world, and it was built on political freedom.

"Helping families get into the U.S. — and stay here — is a very rewarding thing." ♦