

A Lawyer Aids Immigrants' American Dreams Through Her Firm



When a mother and stepfather were kept an ocean apart from their teenage son for almost a year by U.S. immigration officials, Rosanna Berardi of Berardi Immigration Law came to the rescue.

Marleen Pfeiffer, a Dane, had married a U.S. citizen in June of 2014, and become a permanent resident about a year later. Her son, Mads, joined her in the U.S. a week before the wedding and remained in the country on a student visa,

according to Berardi.

But then the family flew to Denmark in August of 2015 to care for Pfeiffer's daughter, who was in the hospital with brain cancer, Berardi says. When they tried to return, officers refused to let Mads on the plane, because Pfeiffer had unwittingly failed to renew his visa. He went to live temporarily with his grandparents while his mother struggled to get him home.

Berardi and her firm stepped in and, while still in the process of fixing Mads' paperwork, convinced the government to let him return to America. Berardi even got to be there for the reunion. "I think about them all the time. The kid was so excited to be back."

Berardi and her 10 employees -- eight full-time, two part-time -- have helped many other immigrants. The firm takes on over 500 cases each year, most of which come to them through Internet searches or referrals. And it's growing; Berardi declined to disclose the firm's revenue, but said it has risen 20% each year for the past 3 years.

The majority of her Buffalo, N.Y., firm's clients are companies looking to bring in talent from abroad. However, the family she helped reunite gets to the heart of why she chose immigration law. "It makes you feel like this job has a huge impact on people's lives," she says. "I know this sounds corny, but I feel like it's a calling."

Twists and Turns

When Berardi enrolled at Canisius College in Buffalo, N.Y., in 1990, she initially selected English as her major, with plans to become a teacher after commencement. But halfway through her undergraduate education, she began to wonder if she was limiting herself.

Then, she had a good experience interning for United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, a part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, during her junior year. That led her to law school, which she believed would open up opportunities for her in politics, business ownership, corporate life and more.

After completing her undergraduate degree, she worked as an immigration inspector for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Berardi graduated from the SUNY Buffalo School of Law in 1997 and worked first as assistant district counsel at INS, and then as an immigration attorney at SUNY Buffalo's International Student and Scholar Services.

After that, she landed a job at Hodgson Russ, a large firm in the city that focused on corporate immigration law. "I liked the work, but I didn't care for the setting," she confessed. "When you have 100 lawyers in one building, that's a scary place. I can say that because I'm one of them."

Berardi stuck it out for 6 years, but couldn't envision staying there for the

long haul. When she left, she wasn't sure what her next step should be -- at one point, she even considered becoming a librarian. But her family encouraged her to open her own firm and, in June of 2005, she did exactly that.

"I started a firm because I'm good at what I do: being an immigration lawyer," she says. As the firm grew, however, she took on more managerial tasks than case files. "My job has changed significantly. I was doing all of the hands-on work at the beginning. Now, I have three other lawyers who do the drafting."

She says she's happy with the shift. "I get bored quickly, so I like the constant change and challenge." That's a good thing, given immigration has, once again, become a topic of heated debate in U.S. politics.

A Politically Charged Career Path

President Donald Trump campaigned on promises to curtail immigration and, in January, issued an executive order banning refugees and non-citizens from seven Muslim-majority nations from entering the country. That order was subsequently struck down in court. Then in February, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers carried out a wave of arrests of undocumented immigrants around the country.

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Growing a Firm

Entrepreneurship isn't smooth going. Berardi likens the experience to "riding a roller coaster all day -- there are ups and downs, and sometimes things go really fast, while other times they go really slow."

The "ups" come from the happiness of her clients -- Berardi recently learned that Mads is days away from receiving his green card, and that the Pfeiffer family is growing, with twin boys on the way.

Either way, Berardi likes the ride, and, going forward, she aims to keep the firm on the path to growth. She recently became certified as a woman-owned business in the state of New York to pursue government contracting opportunities. Now, she's looking into federal certification.

No matter what that effort yields, her firm will remain focused on helping clients navigate the immigration process -- however it may change. "I've helped so many people achieve the American dream," she says. "Despite the challenges, you couldn't pay me to be a librarian."

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