

Up Close and Personal with Mary Kramer and Alsy Lomangino of The South Florida AILA Legal Assistance Project

MARY KRAMER AND ADALSINDA "ALSY" LOMANGINO are volunteer institutions in South Florida. Their current endeavor is the "South Florida AILA Legal Assistance Project," an effort that the AILA South Florida Board and Chapter have strongly supported and have provided nominal financial assistance. Taking almost a year to initiate, the project also generated interest at the Executive Office of Immigration Review (EOIR) in Washington, D.C., with Chief Judge Michael J. Creppy becoming personally involved to help promote and support Kramer and Lomangino's efforts.

In fact, Creppy has awarded these two supervising attorneys with the Meritorious Public Service Award for their volunteer efforts.

How the Legal Assistance Project Works

Kramer, Lomangino, and four immigration judges (IJs) in South Florida (Denise Slavin, Sandra Coleman, Scott Alexander, and Ronald Sonom) comprise the committee that oversees the project. The project committee is especially careful to refer to pro bono attorneys only those cases meeting a true financial need in order to ensure that it does not compete with the local immigration bar. Due to the strict criteria and screening, usually no more than

two respondents are actually referred to pro bono attorneys each month.

After two master calendar hearings before an IJ, if the respondent still has been unsuccessful in finding an attorney due to financial reasons, the individual is called to a third "special" master calendar hearing. At that time, he or she is given an intake sheet that has been translated into four languages. The intake sheet is given only to those individuals whom the IJ determines qualify for the project due to financial reasons.

Kramer and Lomangino review the intake sheets. If they determine that there is a financial need but no relief available, they do not agree to take the case. If there is a financial need, but it is a straightforward case through which a IJ can easily guide the in-

dividual, they do not take the case. Due to the project's very limited resources, the team must focus on cases through which the individuals cannot navigate on their own—cancellation of removal (both criminal and non-criminal), complicated and meritorious asylum cases, battered spouse cases, and the like.

Once the individual meets the criteria for representation through the project, Kramer and Lomangino contact a volunteer attorney and ask that he or she take on the matter pro bono.

The Women Behind the Project

Lomangino is a classic example of a young person who was afforded opportunity in the United States and who wants to return the gifts she feels she has received. Lomangino came to the United States under "Operation Peter Pan," a program sponsored by the Catholic Church and the U.S. Department of State, which permitted Cuban parents to send their children to the United States during the 1960s.

In addition to personally volunteering numerous hours to represent immigration clients who cannot afford her services, mentoring immigration attorneys with questions, and undertaking the administrative duties of the South Florida AILA Legal Assistance Project, Lomangino—a sole practitioner—also volunteers with Catholic Charities Legal Services in Miami. In what little spare time she has, Lomangino produces a local cable immigration "call-in" television program—"Immigration and You"—which airs six months a year in Miami.

Lomangino was an original advisor for the South Florida Chapter's first pro bono project, volunteering actual office time. She has served as the EOIR Liaison for the Chap-



Mary Kramer (left) and Alsy Lomangino in the Great Hall of the Department of Justice.

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ter, and she has chaired the Florida State Bar Immigration Specialization Committee.

She and Kramer are cut from the same cloth. Kramer helps immigrants in need because “those of us who have been fortunate in our lives—and I’ve been extremely fortunate—should give something back. In the end, we only win again.” Kramer also has devoted numerous pro bono hours over the years of her immigration practice in south Florida. She has always juggled at least two or three pro bono cases at a time in her sole practice, accepting cases from Catholic Charities as well as from immigration judges, priests, and other sources. In describing her inability to estimate the number of hours per year she devotes to pro bono representation, Kramer indicates that it’s “a lot.”

In addition to voluntary representation of clients, Kramer assists Lomangino with “Immigration and You,” serves on the Board of Catholic Charities, has just finished her term as Chair of the South Florida Chapter, currently chairs the South Florida Chapter Krome Committee, and—last but not least—works with AILA on immigrants’ rights regarding driver’s licenses.

Lend a Helping Hand

In June of last year, AILA President Jack Pinnix reminded all AILA members of President George W. Bush’s challenge that each American devote time to volunteer work. As immigration lawyers, we have a unique opportunity to contribute in a way that no one else can: we understand the issues noncitizens in this country face and we must feel called upon to help. There are so many ways in which our membership can ease the burden of noncitizens—from litigating a constitutional issue before a federal court of appeals; representing a Liberian asylum applicant before an IJ; accompanying a Moroccan national to a special registration interview before INS Investigations; helping a Laotian national navigate naturalization; to serving on an AILA committee or board, or mentoring less experienced attorneys.

Kramer states our role as volunteers so eloquently: “The benefit of pro bono work is the same as the benefit of doing community service. Life is not just about going to work and collecting a wage. It’s also not just about loving and helping one’s own family. I like to embrace life and all it has to offer. That means respecting others who are not as fortunate as you, helping others move forward in life, lending a hand. I cannot change the world, but I can do my own little part. Working on worthwhile pro bono cases is a way of ‘doing my part.’ Finally, let me say that I have two small children. José is 8 and Liz is 5. I want to be a role model for them and raise them to be sensitive and caring adults. Community service and pro bono work send an important message to our children. This is another reason why I think pro bono work is important.”

More to Come

The national AILA Pro Bono Committee is committed to recognizing AILA members who are volunteering all over the country on behalf of noncitizens and to encouraging every member to share their knowledge and expertise to benefit those noncitizens in need. In future issues of *ILT*, we will bring you stories of other members who volunteer—and, as soon as possible, we will make available to you a registry of on-going opportunities, projects, and ideas in which you may become involved.

Please let us know of fellow members, law firms, or projects you would like to see profiled in *ILT*, and please inform us of any volunteer opportunities we can include in the registry. You may send this information to the Pro Bono Committee’s National Office contact, Susan Quarles, at squarles@aila.org.

The Pro Bono Committee hopes to help you find your own inspiration for volunteering to help noncitizens in need. 

C. Lynn Calder is Chair of the American Immigration Lawyers Association’s Pro Bono Committee.