

A LAWYER'S PERSONAL JOURNEY—By Attorney Aggie Dolinska

When people ask me why I have chosen to become an immigration attorney, I have to pause to think of the many multi-layered reasons that have led me to do what I do. I would say that my own immigration journey has been one of the motivating forces. As many of you may know, I was born abroad and had to maneuver through the complicated immigration laws myself in order to stay in the United States legally, obtain lawful permanent resident status, and eventually become a naturalized citizen. In fact, I became a citizen of this great country just three months ago. I cannot truly describe the joy and sense of accomplishment I felt when I raised my hand to pledge allegiance to America. Needless to say, the 4th of July holiday we just celebrated two days ago had a much deeper and special meaning to me this year, knowing that this country is now truly my own.

I also genuinely enjoy helping people. Certainly as an immigration attorney, I have many chances to make a difference in my clients' lives and I am honored to do so. I'd be lying if I said that the task of helping a person remain in the United States is easy. In fact, it rarely is. Most of the time, my job can get quite daunting and difficult. Despite the seemingly low odds, however, I strive to do the best job possible and do my utmost to bring about a positive outcome.

To be truly effective as an attorney, I have to stay educated and keep up with the ever evolving immigration laws and policies. I also have to continue increase my knowledge of the existing laws and procedures. There is no other way I can be otherwise be successful and make a difference. For this reason, I decided a few years ago to become a Certified Specialist in Immigration and Nationality Law.

A few background notes here. The California State Bar offers legal certification program, which allows attorneys the opportunity to demonstrate expertise and high competence, to be evaluated by a panel of experts, in one of 11 possible areas of law. Immigration and Nationality Law is one of such areas. Legal certification is available to attorneys who are in the third year of legal practice or beyond.

To become certified, an attorney must take a comprehensive written exam, which covers any topic within the area of expertise. If the attorney passes the exam, he or she can then submit a written application for certification. While this sounds easy, it is not. In order to meet the application requirements, an attorney must demonstrate that, within the 5 years immediately preceding the filing of the application, he or she has been “substantially involved in the practice” of immigration law. This means that the attorney must have fully participated (was the principal attorney) in 150 cases, which involved nonimmigrant and immigrant cases and hearings before the immigration judges. Additionally, the attorney must meet certain educational requirements to complete the application. They consist of at least 45 hours of educational activities specifically dedicated to immigration law. The activities usually include continuing education events wherein the attorney actively participates and learns more about the particular topic like naturalization issues or nonimmigrant visas.

I am happy to report that I was able to meet the above requirements. I took the 6-hour exam and passed it, which was a personal success. I also worked diligently to comply with the educational and experience requirements. Following the submission of my application for legal certification and a background check, I received a letter from the California State Bar this week, informing me that I “earned” the title of Certified Specialist in Immigration and Nationality Law. Needless to say, I am overjoyed and happy. I am also mindful that more than ever now it is

incumbent upon me to keep up with my immigration education daily and represent my clients to the best of my abilities, worthy of this prestigious title of Certified Specialist bestowed upon me by the California State Bar.

It is noteworthy that Certified Specialists comprise a very small percentage of all immigration attorneys in California. According to the California State Bar, there are only 57 Certified Specialists in Los Angeles. Considering how many immigration attorneys practice in this county, 57 is a small number by comparison.

Thus, if you are seeking immigration law advice, please consider the above information. At Wilner & O'Reilly, we have a dedicated team of experienced attorneys, including two Certified Specialists and one former adjudication officer with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Our support staff is also highly trained and well versed in immigration law. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us. We will be happy to assist you. Our offices are located in Cerritos, Santa Ana, Riverside, and now also in Salt Lake City, Utah.