



Beth Stickney and Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project: Creating Positive Change for Maine's Immigrant Community

Part of "Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine"

Written by Janice Rogers

Imagine you have moved to a country halfway around the world, where you don't speak the language, don't know anybody, have left your entire family back in your home country, and need to find employment in order to support yourself as quickly as possible. How do you navigate the unfamiliar and overwhelmingly complex legal system in your new country to successfully apply for residency, work authorization, and eventually to bring your family to live with you?

In Maine, that's where Beth Stickney and the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP) come in. Stickney, the Executive Director of ILAP, co-founded the agency in 1993, which is the only

organization in Maine to provide comprehensive immigration-related legal services to low income residents statewide. Today they serve over 2500 individuals from every Maine county with legal consultations, immigration applications, and representation to assist them in gaining the immigration benefits they seek.

So how did a Northeastern Law student specializing in environmental law come to do immigration advocacy work? "I realized that I liked client contact, and that I was not going to have as much of that in environmental law," Stickney relates. "So, I got involved in general legal aid, and began to take on Central American asylum cases pro

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bono, since I speak Spanish. I fell in love with the work, and got into immigration law full time from that point on."

A year after graduating from law school in 1985, Stickney went into private practice specializing in immigration law, and later switched to the nonprofit world, working at the International Institute of Boston. She found the work she was doing – helping people legally achieve the American dream – enormously rewarding. She also saw many people coming from Maine to Boston for legal help with immigration issues, because there was no formal organization in Maine to do so.

In 1993, on a volunteer basis, she co-founded what would later become ILAP, writing grants to try to staff the project and hopefully return to Maine herself to continue her work. In 1994, she created and began teaching the Immigration Law Seminar at the University of Maine School of Law, and received funding from the American Bar Association to start a pro bono project, and structured her course so that her second or third year law students could receive extra credit for helping prepare asylum cases while working with attorneys on the newly formed Pro Bono Immigration Panel. After moving to Maine full-time in late 1998, Stickney worked for a year assessing needs and doing grant writing, until she formally opened the doors of the agency in 2000.

Growing from a staff of one, working from home, to a team of 9 employees and 80 volunteer attorneys helping thousands of clients gain legal status and build lives in Maine is a testament to the hard work and "just do it" attitude that Stickney embodies. Her focus and day-to-day work have changed over time as the agency has grown; she no longer has a full client caseload, although she still participates in consultations with clients to keep her grounded in current issues that immigrants face, and in developments of immigration law. These days, much of her time is spent doing systemic advocacy work, laying the groundwork with the Maine Legislature to help promote

legislation that supports the immigrant community.

Along those lines, in 2005 she and ILAP founded the Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition, bringing together groups such as the Maine People's Alliance, the Maine Civil Liberties Union, and the Maine Migrant Health Program, the NAACP, and the Maine Council of Churches, as well as others, to work together and identify issues affecting Maine's immigrant communities and to advocate collectively for solutions. "We need to have more people involved in educating our elected representatives so they can be informed and really care about the impact any proposed legislation may have on this community," she says. She also has to work hard on increasing ILAP's funding in order to further expand the organization. Although they receive financial support from the Maine Bar Foundation, most of their working capital comes from contributions and from their major annual fundraiser each March, the CeleSoirée, which celebrates immigration through the arts. She hopes to increase their funding so that she can hire another attorney this year to manage and grow the pro bono panel. "We are always overstretched," she admits. "Sometimes we have to make tough decisions about no longer taking certain types of cases, simply because we don't have the resources or bandwidth to continue to handle them."

For herself, she is very happy doing what she is doing, and she realizes the importance of looking at the big picture and effecting change at that level. "If there were a paid position to work exclusively on policy and systemic advocacy to improve our laws affecting immigrants at the federal and state levels at some point, I'd be interested in that position," she says. Given the positive impact Stickney and ILAP have had on Maine's immigrant communities, it's not hard to imagine the progress she would make in such a role.

**What are you doing to
impact your community?
Tell us.**

