

Melanie Goldberg

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.¹*

While others may be critical of the influx of immigrants to the United States, Melanie Goldberg helps them every step of the way. Goldberg has been active with Freedom House in Detroit since 1998, first as a pro bono attorney, then on the Board of Directors of Freedom House since 2002. She also serves on the Standing Committee on Board Development and an Ad Hoc Bylaws Revision Committee. She remains available as a pro bono attorney, and on occasion will take a case that Freedom House cannot take because of its guidelines.

Freedom House is one of only two organizations in the United States that provides housing, legal, medical, and psychological services to persons seeking political asylum in the U.S. It also advocates for systemic change that more fully recognizes the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers. In addition to her service as a director, Goldberg provides advice and acts as a sounding board on an almost daily basis for the legal staff at Freedom House. The staff helps persons who have been persecuted in their home countries to find safe haven in the United States. Goldberg directly and indirectly contributes to the welfare and safety of persons who are victims of political, religious, and gender-based persecution.

Attorney David Koelsch is familiar with Melanie's work. He says, "Ms. Goldberg is an outstanding immigration attorney and has donated countless hours of her time serving pro bono clients and as a board member of Freedom House."

After law school, Goldberg first worked in the law office of Ingrid Brey, who focuses



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on employment-based immigration law. Brey taught Goldberg the ins and outs of the practice. A year and a half later, as Goldberg was building her practice, she looked for opportunities to gain exposure in Immigration Court, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service's Detroit office, and the Chicago asylum office. She also wanted to spend time with seasoned attorneys versed in several areas of immigration law. Her interests led to working with the Archdiocese of Detroit on a pro bono basis. She accompanied the archdiocesan immigration attorney when the lawyer did outreach work in different communities on a monthly basis. They traveled to different centers in and out of the Detroit metropolitan area, performing intake interviews and answering immigration-related questions. She began her archdiocese work in April 1999 and went on periodic outreach missions for almost two years.

Goldberg reports that attorneys who practice in immigration law know what a struggle it is. The possibilities for their clients to succeed in maintaining a legal status in the United States are decreasing daily. In order to provide current and future clients the most

zealous representation possible, she became involved in contacting Congress. For the past two years she has chaired the Congressional Liaison Committee for the Michigan Chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA), where she has been a member since 1997. She alerts members to actions they may take to foster advancement of immigrants' rights in the United States. She also strives to maintain contact with staff in the congressional offices who are most often assigned immigration cases.

Goldberg looks for any opportunity to champion the cause of immigrant rights in the United States. To help other attorneys learn immigration law, she has been a Moot Court Judge for the Immigration Law Clinic at the University of Michigan Law School. She speaks to law school classes about her experiences as a sole practitioner in immigration law and speaks to elementary and middle school classes in the Berkley district about the history and process of immigration in the United States.

In addition to immigration volunteer work, Goldberg centers additional service around her children, Anna, 11 and Felicia, 6, including school work and PTA activities, classroom and library assistance, field trips, and book fairs.

Motivation

How did Goldberg become interested in immigration law? To begin, she always had an interest in other cultures, which led to her undergraduate double major in folklore and linguistics. After receiving a Wayne State University Masters in Teaching, she decided she might help children better through law, especially special education children.

After a year at the University of Detroit Law School, she relocated to New York and received her degree at New York Law School in June 1995. New York Law School offered a course in immigration law. She enrolled in

the class to bridge her interest in other cultures with the study of the law. The class was an epiphany for Melanie. She had no idea of the vastness and intricacy of the law that determines who may come to the United States, how they may qualify themselves to come, and how very long the whole process could take. She was hooked.

In her last year of law school, she signed up for the Civil Law Clinic. She chose to be on the team that represented clients who were seeking political asylum. It was during that experience that she realized all of the formulas and number limits imposed by Congress had very little meaning when defending persons who were seeking protection from a government that would not or could not protect them. The immigrants were being persecuted in their home countries due to their race, religion, political beliefs, nationality, or membership in a particular social group. Her assigned client for the clinic experience presented a very compelling case. As a student, she had the opportunity to spend a lot of time and energy focused on one client.

What a joy for him and for Goldberg when they learned he was granted asylum. She knew, however, that the nature of his joy was bittersweet. He was pleased that the United States found his case compelling enough to provide him the safety he sought, but he was forsaking his home country. He knew, at that point, he could never go home,

never see his family and friends again at home. It was a wonderful new beginning; at the same time the closing of a door. The experience galvanized Goldberg's passion for immigration law.

For the past five years she has devoted her professional life to immigration law. She continues to represent those seeking asylum, as

well as those seeking family reunification and employment opportunities. Her passion is fueled by her daily experiences. When she represented Freedom House clients at the Chicago Asylum office, when she assisted the archdiocese, and when she represents her clients now, she finds, "it is always a heart-felt, meaningful, and eye-opening experience to get to know men and women who have lived through experiences that most of us who grew up in the United States could not even imagine." How fortunate for us that we were not exposed to that hell, and how fortunate for immigrants and for the principles of this country that there are Melanie Goldbergs to help the oppressed. ♦

Francine Cullari practices real estate, estate planning, and business law in Grand Blanc. She is Vice-Chairperson of the State Bar of Michigan Publications and Website Advisory Committee, where she is responsible for the Michigan Bar Journal. She is the editor of Bar Beat, a local magazine for the legal profession.

FOOTNOTE

1. "The New Colossus" (1883) by nineteenth-century American poet Emma Lazarus, appears on a plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty.

CITIZEN LAWYER

A lawyer should strive to attain the highest level of skill, improve the law and the legal profession, and exemplify the profession's ideals of public service. A new column in the *Michigan Bar Journal*, entitled Citizen Lawyer, will focus on the public-service goal by recognizing lawyers who have made an exceptional voluntary contribution to community causes. Whether it is service for voter registration or scouting, shelters for abused persons or school activities, drafting a constitution for an emerging democracy or solving an environmental problem, lawyers are in a unique position to benefit organizations that need their help. To nominate a lawyer to be featured in Citizen Lawyer, send his or her name and the reasons for your nomination to Francine Cullari at cullarilaw@sbcglobal.net with a copy to Amy Ellsworth at aellsworth@mail.michbar.org.