

ATJ PRO BONO CHAMPION

Robert H. Etnyre, Jr.

Royston, Rayzor, Vickery & Williams, L.L.P. — Houston

How did you get involved in pro bono work, particularly asylum cases?

After law school — I graduated from the University of Houston in 1978 — I always had a pro bono case or two, but in the mid-1980s, I met Joe Vail, a Houston immigration lawyer and professor who passed away in June. He became a good friend ... his loss is a huge one to the immigration bar. You can't replace him. He got everything organized here. [Vail founded the University of Houston Law Center's Immigration Clinic.] At the time, there were a lot of Central Americans coming up due to civil wars in their countries. I took an asylum case and was hooked. It's become something near and dear to my heart.

Why are asylum cases so important to you?

When you do an asylum case, you are helping people who are at their most vulnerable and destitute. Many were suffering persecution in their home countries, then they get here and are put into deportation. They need someone to act as a guide for them through the system.

What are some ways you encourage attorneys or law students to get involved in asylum work?

You can help people with their problem, and you've done something good with your law license. In addition to the Immigration Clinic, lawyers can volunteer with Catholic Charities (the St. Frances Cabrini Center for Immigrant Legal Assistance) and YMCA International Services. They've helped refugees for a long time. Going back to Joe Vail, he created an annual seminar jointly sponsored by the Immigration Clinic, Catholic Charities, and YMCA International. During the seminar, we go from A to Z through the asylum process and provide a manual on all the law. It is our primary recruiting tool. Between 30 and 40 people have attended each seminar and the bulk have taken a case [the next seminar was scheduled for late October]. Once they take one case, they usually take another. We get support from the big firms, but a lot of sole practitioners and lawyers from small firms give very generously of their time.

How do you balance your regular practice with your pro bono work?

The work immigration lawyers do is admirable, but how they make a living, I can't quite figure out. I always try to



keep about five asylum cases going at a time, and they can be time intensive. But that number works well with my private practice, which is primarily admiralty/maritime law.

What have been some of your most memorable pro bono cases?

They have all been memorable in different ways. I'm so proud of all of my clients who have been awarded asylum. They know they've been given a second chance and, invariably, all of them take advantage of it. They are able to leave terrible circumstances and thrive here. For instance, a man from Pakistan was awarded asylum. He brought his family over, starting driving a truck, and now he owns a trucking company. He's done quite well. A young man from Somalia will be graduating from Ohio State University with a degree in chemical engineering. I will be subbing for his father at his graduation. An Albanian woman went on to get her law degree and is now practicing in Houston. Almost all of them stay in touch and keep me updated. Many have become lifelong friends. ☺

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