Alaska Institute for Justice protecting human rights and promoting social justice since 2005

...including immigrants, refugees, crime victims including survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault and Alaska Native communities by providing critical services to these underserved populations through legal representation, language access, training and educational programs and advocating for climate justice.

This series of six articles, Human Rights: Legal Social and Climate Justice, will explore the origins of AIJ 16 years ago, the various programs it offers, and its impact on our state in its unwavering devotion to preserving and defending the rights of all Alaskans.

For 16 years, the Alaska Institute for Justice has worked tirelessly to promote social justice, serving nearly 7,000 Alaskans since its inception in 2005. Although its beginnings were humble, the services that the organization, then known as the Alaska Immigration Justice Project, provides were vital and have never been more needed.

Navigating the immigration system in this country is a perilous journey. The rules are complex and ever-changing, and immigration lawyers, especially those whose first language is not English, specifically those fleeing untenable and often dangerous conditions in their home country, adjusting their immigration status can seem like an insurmountable task.

Many are victims of human trafficking or violent crimes and sexual abuse.

Immigration attorneys Robin Bronen, Mara Kimmel, and Jason Baumetz, among others, were facing this crisis first-hand when they worked at what was then called the Immigration and Refugee Services Program (now the Alaska Immigration Justice Program).

In 2005, they realized that the community’s need for low-cost or pro bono legal assistance was burgeoning and could simply not be ignored.

Numerous other attorneys offered assistance in drawing up the legal paperwork to establish AIJ as a non-profit, including Bob Stewart, Bill Sauge, Dan Rodgers and Jonathon Katcher.

In a town notorious for its plethora of non-profits, initial resistance on the part of some about adding yet another to the mix was quickly wiped down when the Foraker group and the venerable Diane Kaplan of the Rasmussen Foundation also voiced support.

In October 2005, the Alaska Immigration Justice Project opened its doors with a staff of three and a shoestring budget. Bronen served as director and project attorney, Baumetz as staff attorney, and Ana Fernandez as project coordinator.

AIJ added a second program, the Language Interpreter Center, in 2007, offering free and low-cost legal immigration services. The majority of those they serve are victims of crime, and thus covered by a federal grant from the Department of Justice.

AIJ also assists asylum seekers through a pro bono program where local attorneys volunteer their services. Leading that charge since 1998 has been the indefatigable Dan Rodgers who has taken on scores of cases, even while practicing law as a corporate attorney.

Since his retirement, he’s taken his pro bono asylum work with AIJ full time. He, and the volunteer attorneys he supervises and mentors, have successfully sought asylum for clients from Mexico, El Salvador, Cameroon, Gambia, Ethiopia, Russia, Nigeria, Colombia and Morocco, and more.

Other community challenges brought on by climate change.

For Kimmel and others, reflecting on the past 16 years brings a sense of pride, knowing that thousands have benefited from AIJ’s presence in our community.

If this sounds like a lot for what is now a devoted and determined staff of 12 to take on, it certainly is. They are also backed by a vibrant, hands-on board of directors.

Indra Arriaga, who sat on the board before joining the staff as AIJ’s grants and operations director last year, explains that AIJ “sought people with lived experience to the board, including lawyers and immigrants from all communities, IT experts, accountants; the board cuts across professions,” reflecting the diversity of the organization and the community they serve.

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“Real change, enduring change happens one step at a time,” she says. “Alaskans have this unique history of creating something amazing out of very few resources with really determined people. There was a core group of dedicated Alaskans who saw this need, and community members who have supported the work, but it has happened one step at a time. It takes time to create that real change.”

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