

Leila Freijy

A Passionate Advocate in Immigration Law

by Dan Rafter

TROY — Immigration law has been in the news since President Donald Trump’s administration took over in January 2017. But this new focus hasn’t changed the way Troy-based attorney Leila Freijy works: She’s long been focused on, and passionate about, helping individuals and corporate clients navigate the often-complex immigration process.

“Immigration law is certainly making headlines today,” says Freijy, an immigration specialist who runs the **Law Office of Leila Freijy PLLC** in the Detroit suburb of Troy. “It is in the spotlight more than usual. The travel ban that the new administration tried to implement has impacted so many people. It impacted people here in the United States as students or on work visas. It even made U.S. Permanent Residents (green card holders) and naturalized citizens think twice about traveling internationally. Many of my clients were distraught and worried that they couldn’t travel. They didn’t know if they should stay in the United States.”

Freijy’s job? She had to decipher the possible implications of the administration’s proposed travel ban and determine how it would impact her clients, most of whom are corporations that rely on immigrant workers to develop their high-tech products.

“There was so much confusion,” Freijy says. “Immigration law can always be confusing. There is a lot of emotion involved in it even during calmer times. When the travel ban came down, there was a lot of fear that spread throughout the immigrant community. And it wasn’t just Muslims who were concerned. It was everyone traveling from other countries, whether they were students or workers.”

Freijy, of course, doesn’t know what will eventually become of the Trump administration’s travel ban. The administration’s second attempt at travel restrictions is currently on hold and tied up in court. But Freijy already knows what her job will entail, no matter what becomes of the ban: She needs to make sure that her clients and their employees can legally work in, and safely travel to and from, the United States.

And for Donna Kinsey, human resources manager with the Novi office of India-based conglomerate Tata Group, there is no immigration attorney who is better at this.



“I’ve worked with a lot of attorneys, and Leila is the best I have ever worked with,” Kinsey says. “She gives you more than what you pay for, and she always understands the business of the companies she represents. That’s rarer than you might think. For her to have such an understanding of engineering — which she needs when representing us — is incredible. The average attorney wouldn’t put in that kind of effort.”

Just as importantly to Kinsey, Freijy is always available to her clients, too. She returns phone calls quickly, and she returns them with answers.

“It’s amazing how accessible Leila is,” Kinsey says. “I know how busy she is. But if you call her and she is there, she will

answer that phone. And if she isn’t, she will get back to you quickly. And she’ll take the time to listen to your concerns and work out solutions. She makes you feel as if you are her most important client.”

Finding Her Passion

Freijy has been practicing immigration law in Michigan since 1999 and has received plenty of commendations for her work during this time. An example? She’s been listed in Best Lawyers in America from 2007 through 2017.

Freijy and her office handle everything related to family and corporate immigration law, taking on cases involving non-immigrant visas, citizenship, I-9

compliance and permanent residence.

She has experience working with companies in a wide variety of industries, including manufacturing, automotive and information technology, all booming industries in Michigan, and all industries that rely heavily on highly skilled immigrant workers. Freijy knows that companies would much rather hire U.S. workers, but the country doesn't have enough U.S. workers in many high-tech occupations such as engineering and IT.

Freijy understands the challenges immigrants face. She is an immigrant to the United States herself, coming to the country with her family on a diplomatic visa when she was 2 years old. Her father served as the Detroit-based Lebanese consulate general until Freijy turned 8.

It was during this time that Freijy learned to speak English. It was also when she developed an appreciation for the United States. After her father's assignment ended, Freijy and her family moved to a different country every three years.

But when it was time for Freijy to attend college, she returned to the United States on an F1 student visa.

"I came here as a student, like many of my clients," Freijy says. "Also like them, I stayed. I became a U.S. permanent resident. I became a citizen."

But after becoming a citizen, Freijy didn't immediately pursue a career in law. She was a communications major at the University of Michigan and worked as a technical writer for software companies for about a decade. Five years into this career, though, Freijy had an epiphany.

She enjoyed her work, but it wasn't a passion. She couldn't imagine writing technical manuals into her 60s. So, Freijy enrolled at Wayne State University Law School and graduated with her law degree in 1997.

"When I listened to the radio every day, all the interesting things happening in the world had to do with Supreme Court cases, legal challenges, that sort of thing," Freijy says. "So I went to law school. I wasn't planning on becoming an immigration attorney. I wanted to be a general practitioner, open a little office, and do some divorce work, some wills, some trusts, some real estate. I wanted to dabble."

But again, things changed. She took a two-credit immigration course at Wayne State. And that course inspired Freijy to rethink her entire approach to a career in law.

"I was hooked," she says. "Maybe it was because of my background, traveling

around the world, coming through the immigration process myself. Ever since that course, I knew what I wanted to do."

Client Happiness

What makes immigration law so rewarding? Often, it's the reactions of the companies and individuals whom Freijy helps resolve immigration issues.

"This kind of law is transactional," Freijy says. "When you file a successful petition for someone, the company is happy because it gets the talent it needs. The employees and their families are happy because they now have a great opportunity in front of them. The government is happy as long as everything is done properly and legally. At the end of the day with most cases, everyone is happy. You are not in court, yelling at each other."

This isn't to say that immigration law is devoid of challenges. New presidential administrations, of course, can bring major changes to the immigration process.

Freijy is already seeing this. Today, not as many college students are emigrating to the United States. A growing number are

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choosing universities in other countries to avoid any possible complications resulting from the current anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States.

This has a trickle-down impact on U.S. colleges and the country's economy, Freijy says.

"We knew this would happen, that the applications from college students would go down," Freijy says. "That is important. Not only do we lose that stream of talent, it impacts universities, their income. These immigrant students are all coming and paying out-of-state tuition. This impacts the taxes coming into our states, too. These students rent apartments. They buy food, phones, cars. All of this will be impacted."

Freijy has also taken on immigration cases that are extremely complicated. And she's had to fight for her clients' rights to bring in talent from other countries.

She points to cases in the last few years in which employees were not approved for their visas even though officials with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

had approved cases in the past that were identical. Freijy has sued immigration services twice to win these cases. She was successful both times.

"Those denials ended up as approvals," she says. "There were no good reasons for those cases to be denied. The bottom line is that we will pursue whatever path we need to take for our clients. We don't shy away from fighting for them."

Proper Traits for the Practice

Why has immigration law been such a good fit for Freijy? She points to several traits that have helped her succeed in this field.

First, she's a talented writer. Freijy credits her background as a technical writer for this.

"We do a lot of writing," she says. "It is important to write concisely, clearly and properly, without resorting to a lot of legalese. That has helped me in this field."

Then there's her personality. Freijy — and those who have worked with her often describe her in this way — is known for being diplomatic. She works to find solutions. She remains calm. And she never lets emotion impact her representation.

"Being diplomatic is so important, both in dealing with clients and employees and those times in which you are working face-to-face with government officials. Even when you are dealing with government attorneys over the phone, taking a diplomatic approach is important," Freijy says.

Kristen Robinson, a divorce and family law attorney with the Mellin Robinson law firm in Troy, first met Freijy when the two were taking an art class together. During the class, Robinson and Freijy discovered they both worked as lawyers. That connection led to a friendship and a working relationship. The two often refer cases to each other.

Freijy has played an important role in helping Robinson's clients, she says. In Robinson's practice, immigration issues often play a role because immigration status can be impacted by divorce.

"A client here on a visa or work permit might want to file for divorce. They need to consult with an immigration attorney to determine the ramifications of that divorce," Robinson says. "How will the divorce impact someone's ability to stay in the United States? Leila has been more than helpful in consulting with me on those cases. And these are not run-of-the-mill questions. It's helpful to have an immigration expert who can lay everything out."

Of course, Robinson could turn to other

immigration attorneys. But she chooses Freijy. Why? Freijy is always available and helpful, and she truly understands the intricacies of immigration law, Robinson says.

“Leila is one of those people whom you can always rely on,” Robinson says. “She would give you the shirt off her back. Everyone gets busy, especially attorneys. But that doesn’t matter for Leila. If something is going on and you need her for something, she’ll drop everything to help you. She is extremely reliable and loyal.”

Freijy also understands many of the stresses under which her clients and their employees operate. Emigrating to a new country is never an easy task. Living in a new community, one that might be halfway around the globe, is challenging, too.

And because Freijy has lived in and traveled to so many countries, she’s also gained a better understanding of the beliefs and cultures of the clients she helps.

“The fact that I have traveled across the world makes me empathetic,” Freijy says. “I understand what my clients are going through. There is a constant worry until they become green card holders. Until that happens, they are constantly on edge. They don’t feel settled. I understand the process they are going through. I have been through it myself.”

Immigrants might be feeling even more uncertainty today. This isn’t just because of the new presidential administration, either. Freijy says the Internet is partly to blame.

Today, immigrants are quick to share their experiences through blogs, chat rooms and online forums. The problem is, much of this online information can’t be verified. Some of it might not be accurate. And much of it is overwhelmingly negative.

This means that Freijy today must counsel her clients to read online immigration stories with a critical eye.

“There are a lot of negative experiences posted online about the horror stories some have gone through when applying for visas,” Freijy says. “I tell people not to waste their time looking at these. They don’t know the facts behind the stories. They don’t know why something happened.

“People aren’t spending a lot of time blogging about what a great experience they had at a U.S. consulate. I try to calm them down about what the facts are and what they need to do on their side to be prepared.” ■