

Leading LAWYERS

Ten of the D.C. Area's Top Immigration Attorneys

Jan Pederson

Pederson Immigration Law Group

If you ask Jan Pederson's clients, Annie Sullivan has nothing on her. Pederson, they say, is the real miracle worker.

Consider Dr. Eduardo Krajewski. "I talked to other lawyers and they told me it was a lost cause," he says. But last month, Pederson won him a critical exemption from a visa requirement: He won't have to return to Venezuela for two years before seeking permanent residency in the United States.

As a Jew, Krajewski feared he and his family, including his American-born son, would face rampant anti-Semitism in his native country. "We were so stressed we couldn't sleep at night, but she managed to get us through it," he says. "She fulfilled all our dreams."

Pederson, 56, leads the two-lawyer Pederson Immigration Law Group. She is best known for her work on behalf of doctors in navigating the labyrinthine J-1 visa process (for educational and cultural exchange visitors) and for her work with consular officials.

She routinely travels to Mexico and Canada as well as to more distant locales, such as Cyprus, the Philippines, and Dubai, to help clients obtain visas from U.S. consular officials. Typically, these clients are looking to come to the United States on student or investor visas. The decision to grant such visas rests entirely with individual officials.

The key to success, Pederson says, is "persistence and finding a person that's willing to give you a fair hearing." She has cultivated relationships with State Department employees that go back 20 years or more, in part by ensuring that her clients write thank-you notes to officials and letters of praise to supervisors.

Pederson's ability to find a sympathetic ear was put to the test in an unusual case involving a married couple, both doctors from Iran, who came to the United States on H-1 and J-1 visas. It's routine for children to accompany their parents, but, inexplica-



bly, consular officials had denied visas for the couple's two young children nine times.

Three years passed with the family apart. In 2004 the parents hired Pederson, the fifth lawyer on their case. Within nine months she was able to obtain visas for the children, by then ages 7 and 10, and reunite the family in America.

"We call her the blue-eyed angel," says Dr. Reza Tabibi, the children's father. "She's a wonderful attorney. She charges a lot, but she brought my children here." He adds, "Our mistake was we didn't hire her sooner."

She hung out her shingle as a solo practitioner in 1980. In the wake of the 1979 revolution in Iran, her clientele was soon dominated by Iranians desperate to come to the United States. With no U.S. consulate left in Iran, they would travel to a third country in the hopes of persuading an American official there to grant them a visa.

"I'd call up [U.S. consulates] in the only way I know how to be, which is straightforward, and say, 'I have some Iranian clients. Would you be willing to entertain their cases?' And some would say 'yes,' and others would say 'No way. Are you crazy?'" Pederson recalls. Then she would accompany the client in person on the interview with the official. As she puts it, "You need to grovel with grace."

Over the years the Iranian work has tapered off, but, as Pederson says, "If I can do Iran, I can do anyone." Her clients now come from all corners of the world, especially India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and various South American countries.

A Guatemalan maid was at the center of one of Pederson's favorite cases. In 1928 the maid became pregnant as the result of an affair with the U.S. ambassador to Guatemala. Years after the ambassador's death (he was cremated, so DNA testing was out), Pederson managed to convince the State Department that he had fathered the child and that U.S. citizenship was in order for the maid's son and grandson.

"The mother was really determined to remain alive until the United States government recognized her son was a U.S. citizen," Pederson says. "It was immensely rewarding."