

JIM HALLAGAN

Helping Immigrants Establish New Lives in America

by Edward McClelland



The lobby of James Hallagan's office looks like a Third World Imports store. There's a ceramic plate from Lithuania. A stuffed parrot from Colombia. A tall cylinder wrapped in red, green, and yellow African cloth.

They're all gifts from satisfied clients: immigrants Hallagan has helped win the right to live in the United States.

"I don't know how many bottles of tequila I have," says Hallagan, who, truth be told, is not a big drinker. "I was sent a banana tree by a client in Mexico. I've gotten briefcases, socks. One guy sent me an overcoat."

(Hallagan has also received more intimate thank yous. When he was waiting for his luggage in O'Hare, after a flight back from Rome, a Swissair attendant threw her arms around him. He'd helped her emigrate from Bulgaria.)

The gifts are so personal because when Hallagan is handling an immigration case, he's one of the most important people in a client's life.

"And you have extremely happy people when you're done," says Hallagan, a managing principal in **Minsky McCormick & Hallagan PC**. "It's a lot of one-on-one time."

Hallagan was inspired to pursue immigration law by his sister Margaret H. McCormick, who

finished DePaul Law School a few years before he did and went to work for Travelers Aid. After Hallagan earned his law degree, he went to Mexico for five months to study Spanish. He attended a school in Cuernavaca, then decamped to a small village in the mountains of Durango for a total immersion experience.

"I knew no one would speak English there," he says. "This little town was so desolate. There were 200 people there. Their pigs were sleeping in the streets. I think I lasted two weeks."

The language lessons came in handy, though. More than half of Hallagan's clients are from Latin America, which means that, on a typical workday, "I speak Spanish more than English. It's very common for us to get a call that begins, 'Yo soy, Juan.'"

Because his Spanish is legal Spanish, Hallagan doesn't do so well reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez or watching the telenovelas on Univision: He can get the gist of the story but not the emotional impact. Emotional terms aren't in his vocabulary. Minsky McCormick & Hallagan does employ a Spanish-speaking and a Polish-speaking assistant.

Dropping Everything But Immigration Law

When Hallagan and his sister started their

firm, in 1980, they intended to pursue a general practice—everything from misdemeanors to divorces. But Hallagan remembers the first time he tried a workers' compensation case. He showed up for a meeting with a single file. All the other attorneys had briefcases full of documents.

"As we got cases, they were all in the immigration field," he says. "...We dropped and dropped and dropped, gradually dropped almost everything [else]. By '83, we were only immigration law."

One reason Hallagan's firm has been so successful in this field is that it doesn't necessarily compete with other firms. The firm's attorneys compete with travel agents and brothers-in-law who insist they can fill out immigration forms for free, or storefront lawyers in ethnic neighborhoods who may share a client's language and culture but lack expertise in American immigration law.

"We don't really compete with other lawyers," Hallagan says. "We deal with all these other forces out there. There's a lot of people that don't want to work within their same ethnic group. A Mexican typically will not want a Mexican lawyer, because they're afraid of getting ripped off. A Polish person prefers a Polish attorney. A Lithuanian doesn't. We don't really fall in an ethnic group here, being Irish."

Dusko Pavolovic came to Chicago from Yugoslavia in 1992, just before that country's war began. He originally used a Serbo-Croatian speaking attorney to handle his immigration case. After "that guy does not do so well," Pavolovic turned to Hallagan.

"He's really, really professional; he's really good," Pavolovic says. "Anyone who has questions about immigration, I would send to him."

Pavolovic now operates a successful business, Beograd Meat Market, and will become a citizen next year. He has invited Hallagan to eat at his restaurant.

Hallagan has a knack for forming close bonds with his clients, says his sister.

"He just takes such a personal interest in everybody's situation," McCormick says. "The clients know him; he's beloved by the clients. Sometimes, I wish he would delegate more, because he works so hard."

Reuniting Families

Hallagan handles both work and family cases. The work cases generally involve small computer consultants or architectural firms trying to bring employees over from Asia on temporary visas. The family cases are more complicated, but ultimately, more satisfying, because Hallagan is either reuniting families, or ensuring that they will never be separated.

A typical case involves a Mexican national who came to this country, then married an American citizen, bought a house, and started a family. Even with those ties in the United States, the Mexican has to return home to file for residency and has to demonstrate that his absence is a hardship to the family. The hardship “could be anything,” Hallagan says. “It could be illness, it could be economics. Economics are the weakest.”

At the moment, he has a client in Mexico who has been turned down in two interviews with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. He may be stuck there, separated from his wife and children, for a year. It could be worse—and some immigrants have made it worse. Hallagan had a client who received a 10-year ban because she tried to sneak back into the United States to be with her husband. The husband had two children by his first marriage and a good factory job, so it was impossible for him to move to Mexico. He divorced the woman.

“If she hadn’t attempted to return, she probably would have gotten the pardon,”

Hallagan says.

Another case involves a couple from Mexico with two children. The wife, who is a citizen, married her husband after divorcing his brother. The INS suspected fraud. The man filed paperwork for citizenship 12 years ago and is finally getting an interview to prove he and his wife have a real marriage.

Immigration has been a hot political issue in the last decade, with conservatives demanding a wall between Mexico and the United States and Minutemen staking out positions on the border to thwart illegal crossings. The result is a tighter border, something Hallagan warns his clients about.

“It affects the risk. If someone’s here illegally, they’ll call me up and say, ‘My father died; my mother died. I have to go back.’ I say, ‘Look. You leave; you’re not coming back, because the border’s that much tighter.’ Ten years ago, it wasn’t that hard to come across the border. Now, with the enforcement and these different groups, it’s much harder. I’m always telling people: ‘If you go, assume you’re not coming back.’”

Because of the controversy, Hallagan is quick to defend the role of immigrants in America, pointing out that they do jobs Americans refuse to consider: landscaping, hanging drywall, tuck pointing, roofing, busing tables. Because Chicago has been a magnet for foreigners for generations, it is generally tolerant of immigrants, although some of the

suburbs take a harder line.

“If you go into an Indian neighborhood, go into a Polish neighborhood, you get to know those cultures through restaurants. You don’t notice that much background unless people are speaking a different language,” Hallagan says. “Typically, the police will not go into immigration work. So if they stop somebody at a stop sign, they don’t want to know. Some of the suburbs can be very picky. They almost feel like they work for Immigration. It’s somewhat of a backlash. Some suburbs have changed so drastically because of immigration. Carpentersville, Hoffman Estates. I think they get impacted by it, because of the housing developments, and the school crowding, and things like that.”

Hallagan’s own ancestors have been in the United States since before the Civil War, but his wife’s parents both emigrated from Europe after World War II.

His father-in-law was a Polish medical student who spent four years in a German concentration camp. He was eager to leave behind bad memories of Poland by becoming an American citizen. His mother-in-law, whom his father-in-law met when he was a displaced person in Belgium, still hasn’t naturalized. She thinks it would be disloyal to Belgium. If she ever changes her mind, she’ll have no trouble finding a good immigration attorney.

“I told her I’d file for her,” Hallagan says. ■