

pro BONO / by Regina Germain and Ana Dubrovsky

Top Firm Attorneys Advocate Asylum

THE DENVER FIRM of Otten Johnson Robinson Neff + Ragonetti (Otten Johnson) is considered by many to be the number one real estate firm in Colorado, according to *Chambers and Partners' Guide to America's Leading Lawyers for Business*. Despite hectic schedules, attorneys at this firm still find the time to do pro bono asylum work. Thomas Macdonald and Robert Attai have each taken cases through the Rocky Mountain Survivors Center (RMSC). RMSC is a nonprofit organization that assists immigrants who are survivors of torture. Thomas and Robert have no prior immigration law experience, but both are excited about the challenge to use their legal strengths in a new field.



Thomas Macdonald

Macdonald's Philosophy

Thomas has been involved in land use litigation at Otten Johnson since 1985. He graduated from the University of Colorado School of Law and has done pro bono work with the American Civil Liberties Union in Colorado. Thomas took his first asylum case through RMSC in May. His client—a woman from Colombia—had been granted asylum at her merits hear-

ing, but the government appealed the decision and Thomas became involved from that point. It is an ideal case, since his expertise—land use law—is largely at the appellate level.

“It's hard to think of something more important than helping victims of torture,” said Thomas. He is dismayed by the recent furor over immigration and added, “It's the worst kind of fear-mongering. Politically, we seem to be demonizing immigrants.” The pro bono asylum work gives Thomas an opportunity to counteract that negative political force.

Attai's Advantage

Robert is a 1997 graduate of George Washington University Law School and holds a master's degree in Foreign Service. He joined Otten Johnson in 2004 and handles cases dealing with corporations, partnerships, securities, business mergers and acquisitions, international transactions, and corporate finance. Prior to his legal career, Robert worked at the U.S. Department of State and in the Office of the Secretary of Defense in Washington, D.C.

Several years ago, Robert attended an RMSC informational session while doing pro bono guardian ad litem work with abused children. He liked the idea of being directly helpful to asylum-seekers. He explained that as a transactional attorney, “opportunities for pro bono legal work are



Robert Attai

sometimes fairly limited.” After joining Otten Johnson, Robert soon became involved with RMSC and began devoting some of his time to asylum cases.

Robert's first asylum case in May 2006 required a good deal of research and retrieval of corroborating documents from the client's home country and in the United States. His client is an African woman victimized by female genital mutilation and faces persecution for her religious beliefs. RMSC was able to provide a translator to assist with communication and other support—including medical doctors willing to donate their time to examine the client and document physical evidence of torture. The asylum application is almost complete and will be submitted soon.

Because of Thomas [Macdonald], Robert [Attai], and other attorneys willing to donate time and effort in assisting survivors of torture, immigrants have access to incredible resources and invaluable legal expertise.

Asylum work enables Robert to use his transactional skills, government experience, and expertise in international matters. This work also appeals to his “sense of patriotism,” he said. “It’s what America is all about—helping those who face physical persecution and abuse as a result of their religious beliefs, ethnicity, or political views.”

Robert’s father immigrated to the United States in the 1950s, and he credits his father with fostering a long-standing interest in international issues. His education, work experience, and personal interests all blended to make asylum work a good fit for an attorney seeking to do meaningful pro bono work.

A Firm’s Commitment

Both Thomas and Robert appreciate the support offered by Otten Johnson in carrying out their pro bono work. Thomas said, “Attorneys can utilize the firm’s infrastructure to do pro bono work.” In fact, at Otten Johnson, the staff librarian maintains thorough research on up-to-date country conditions, and partners are willing to discuss pro bono ideas and issues, while reliable secretaries help process all of the paperwork. Several attorneys at Otten Johnson are involved with pro bono work in a variety of other fields and many contribute to charities that do not involve legal services.

Asylum applicants have a right to

representation but access to counsel is limited. Otten Johnson is one of several firms that support pro bono work by their employees. Because of Thomas, Robert, and other attorneys willing to donate time and effort in assisting survivors of torture, immigrants have access to incredible resources and invaluable legal expertise. ■

Regina Germain is legal director of RMSC and a member of AILA’s Pro Bono Services Committee, and **Ana Dubrovsky** is a second-year student at Northeastern University School of Law and research assistant for the Domestic Violence Institute.

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