

Q&A: Gail S. Seeram, immigration lawyer

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Age: 32

Born: Berbice, Guyana

Degrees: J.D. from Hofstra University School of Law, 1999; Bachelor of Business Administration in Accounting from Hofstra University, 1996.

Member: Orange County's Children and Family Services Board, American Immigration Lawyers Association.

Gail Seeram tells people she didn't choose immigration law -- immigration law chose her. Her specialty at the start of her law career was real estate. But she found that West Indians -- she is from nearby Guyana -- sought her advice on immigration. Since the Senate debate on an immigration bill picked up steam last year, Seeram's Pine Hills office has been flooded with calls. Now that the bill has been delayed, the phone still rings.

What kinds of calls have you received since the debate began last year?

There is a lot of confusion for a lot of immigrants. They see on the news the talk about reform, and a lot don't understand that it has not become law yet.

Have you seen more clients file for citizenship?

Yes, they see immigration on the news and the term border enforcement.

People have invested a lot here. Filing for citizenship is more to secure themselves, in case there is a law that changes and makes them easily deportable. It is a matter of preserving assets and preserving livelihood.

Is there a fear of deportation?

I have clients who in their younger days got into a little trouble. Now they are in their 40s and 50s, and they are married. They have children. They think: Can the law change where it makes that a small offense, a deportable offense?

How do people respond when they hear you are an immigration attorney?

They automatically think: Oh, you are trying to help the illegal people in the country, which is not necessarily the case. Immigration is a broad issue. It's about families, employment sponsorship, refugee, asylum -- a lot of areas that benefit people, not necessarily illegal people.

How did you become a U.S. citizen?

I was born in Berbice, Guyana, and came to America when I was 5. I became naturalized when my parents applied for citizenship.

Are you an advocate for immigrants -- because you are an immigrant yourself?

I found myself being an advocate in that I want to educate people about the process and how it affects them.

What concerns did you have about the proposed legislation?

The legislation was very contrary to one of the fundamental American values, which is family. The legislation would not have allowed a U.S. citizen to sponsor a child over 21, married or unmarried. Or a U.S. citizen to sponsor a brother or sister.

A lot of hostility exists toward immigrants especially since 9-11. Do you think this will be the wave of the future or something that will pass?

There has always been opposition to immigrants entering this country. Part of that is people protecting themselves, protecting their jobs. I don't think the hostility will blow over. Even if some legislation goes through, it may solve some problems, but not others.

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