

Ed Corrigan, Immigration and Refugee Lawyer

Ed Corrigan has helped about 1,000 immigrants and refugees over the past 10 years. That's in addition to his civil litigation practice and balancing his duties as a city councillor for London, Ontario.

Corrigan says his skills and knowledge are constantly tested, depending on who walks in the door.

"A Yezidi family came to see me," says Corrigan, who tends to represent people from the Middle East. "I had no idea what they were. It turns out they are a minority within the Kurdish community. It's an obscure religion and many people in the Middle East don't even know much about them and here I am, representing Yezidis."

Corrigan says Yezidis belong to an ancient religion that worships the 13 archangels, among other things. It is an intricate faith that shares some of the same traits as Zoroastrianism, Islam and Christianity, but also incorporates the natural world into its system of beliefs. There are about two million Yezidis in the world, living mostly in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Armenia.

Corrigan says challenges like that are all part of being an immigration and refugee lawyer — having to become an instant expert in a country and putting together the research and documentation needed to argue a claim.

"It's very satisfying work. You have the opportunity to help people and feel good about what you're doing. Most of the refugees are fleeing countries with political turmoil or they're facing persecution."

Interest in Middle East politics

Corrigan's interest in foreign cultures was formed while a student of history at the University of Western Ontario in London. He became intrigued by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and took courses on Middle East politics.

He worked at his father's construction business in the 1980s while taking courses part-time for a master's degree in political science. He was also a student politician during those years. Corrigan entered law school at the University of Windsor in 1987 and was called to the bar in 1992.

Corrigan has steadily built a career arguing refugee claims. He has a 70 per cent success rate. Even more impressive are his arguments before the Federal Court — where claimants appeal their cases after being rejected by the Immigration and Refugee Board. More than half of his cases to the court have been successful; that's compared to the average success rate of five per cent among most lawyers.

"If there is some merit, I'll advance it. I will go to the wall for that person."

At any one point, Corrigan has about 50 immigration and refugee cases on the go. Refugee claims are paid for by Legal Aid and have restrictions on the amount of time a lawyer can spend on them.

When refugees arrive at the Canadian border, or any other point of entry, they are given a package of PIFs (Personal Information Forms). The refugee must file the PIFs with the IRB (Immigration and Refugee Board) within 28 days. This is where Corrigan gets involved.

The PIFs require detailed social, employment and educational history. The forms ask the person where they lived, how they travelled and what countries they've been to prior to arriving in Canada. Refugees must explain why they're making a claim and why they're afraid to return to their country of origin. The PIF has to correspond to their story and if there are any omissions or mistakes, however small, immigration officers will take issue.

"It's often difficult to get refugees to focus on the main issues, especially if the person has been traumatized," notes Corrigan. "They are desperate for help so they tell you their life story but I need them to explain the situation in a coherent manner and provide evidence. (I'm) the objective third party who walks them through the case."

An issue of trust: telling their life stories

Corrigan says he often has to spend time gaining refugees' trust because they come from countries where figures of authority are feared. He says some situations are "intensely personal" especially if a person has been tortured or a woman has been abused and sexually assaulted.

"I get a friend or family member or a paralegal who speaks the language to go over the forms. Often, I'll get them to draft their story, write it down. About three-quarters of it is unimportant to their case. I have to get to the stuff that matters, that will get them status in the country."

The PIFs are reviewed by a refugee officer. The officer will determine if the case is a simple one and qualifies for a condensed hearing. An IRB hearing is usually scheduled between eight months and two years after the officer gets the PIFs.

For condensed hearings, Legal Aid will only pay Corrigan eight hours to prepare his client's claim.

Corrigan cites the 100 claims from Colombia he's processed over the last couple of years as examples of condensed hearings. Many professionals or business people have become targets of guerrillas in that country's civil war. They have become victims of extortion or have been kidnapped for money. Corrigan says the situation is well known to the IRB and often an upper-class Colombian will get a condensed hearing. If it's a full hearing, Corrigan is given 16 hours to prepare the documents.

"The board looks at the individual, not the country of origin. Just because there's a war going on doesn't mean you automatically get in. You have to be specifically targeted because of your race, political opinion or social group among other things (outlined in the Refugee Act)."

Corrigan says the board could delay a hearing for up to two years because the person doesn't have the proper documents, or conditions in their country of origin keep changing.

At the hearing, Corrigan will lead his client through their case in the presence of a refugee officer and one member of the board. Both the officer and member are allowed to raise questions or discuss issues concerning the person's case. A hearing could last from four hours to several days.

Doing the right thing

Once accepted as a refugee, there's another four- to six-month wait before the person becomes a landed

immigrant. This is where CSIS — Canada's secret security corps — gets involved. The person is interviewed and security checks are done.

"In most cases, I'm pleased with how Canada treats newcomers," says Corrigan. "If you argue it properly, immigration will do the right thing and accept people."

Corrigan recalls the case of a young Serb who was a draft evader during the Balkan conflict. He was a medical student at the time and didn't want to fight. The young man was already in Canada and had been rejected as a refugee. At the same time, his sister was a permanent resident in Canada and had sponsored her parents to come to Canada. Because he was over 18, she couldn't sponsor him as a dependent.

Corrigan was about to file the application for review to the Federal Court when he got a call from immigration.

"They said if I was willing to put aside the appeal, they would process him as an over-aged dependent under the family class definition. Although he didn't technically fit under the criteria, they felt it was the right thing to do."

Corrigan says the young man has probably gone through medical school by now.

"The look on their faces when they get a positive ruling makes it all worthwhile," says Corrigan.

"There are definitely times I can be proud of Canada. (We) reach out to the persecuted and downtrodden. People are attracted to Canada because we are a tolerant society. I feel very proud to be part of the process of helping these people."