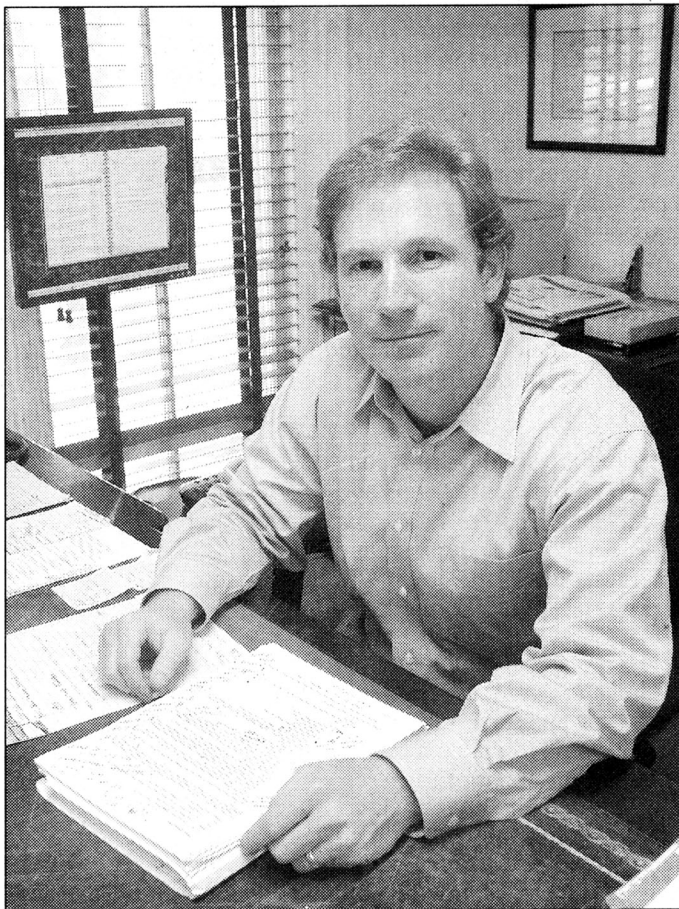


LIFESTYLE



Staff photo by Mark Czajkowski

Attorney Ryan Stark Lilienthal in his Princeton office: 'Some people believe immigrants are a burden on the system. I think that's a total misconception.'

'Ask-a-Lawyer': An attorney honors heritage by offering help

By Kristin Boyd
Staff Writer

Glance at the framed documents and pictures lining Ryan Stark Lilienthal's office wall and it's easy to understand why the attorney is so passionate about immigration law.

The black-and-white photos reveal family meetings, during which uncles and aunts, mothers and fathers, discussed immigrating to the United States to escape Nazi persecution in Austria and Germany. Some, later herded to concentration camps, never made it to American shores.

Nearby are several greenish naturalization papers awarded to Mr. Stark Lilienthal's grandparents and great-grandparents after they settled in Long Island, N.Y., in the 1930s and became proud American citizens.

"I grew up aware of immigrant history and my family history," Mr. Stark Lilienthal says, pointing to his mementos. "Some people believe immigrants are a burden on the system. I think that's a total misconception. I think immigrants today are no different from my grandparents."

In part to honor his family, and in part to assist a new generation of immigrants, Mr. Stark Lilienthal volunteers with Ask-a-Lawyer, a program started in 1999 to offer the Latino community access to affordable legal services.

The program — held four times a year and open to immigrants from anywhere — brings residents and attorneys together for one-on-one confidential consultations. While immigration issues are addressed most frequently, attorneys will discuss all areas of law, including malpractice, child custody, divorce, discrimination and landlord-tenant disputes.

The next Ask-a-Lawyer session is scheduled for 7 to 8:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Princeton Public Library, 65 Witherspoon St. All residents are invited to attend. Spanish and Portuguese interpreters will be available.

Mr. Stark Lilienthal says the program attracts residents from throughout Mercer County, and on occasion, Middlesex and Somerset counties, as well. The first part of the program is spent discussing current legislation, while the remainder is devoted to consultations.

"In the end, hopefully people come out either comforted or at least confident of what paths are available or not available to them," Mr. Stark Lilienthal says.

Volunteer Sally Steinberg, a Princeton attorney specializing in immigration and family law, expects the bulk of questions tomorrow to center on the proposed immigration compromise pending in Congress. Though the bill has not been approved and is still being saddled with amendments, immigrants, both legal and illegal, will want to know how it might affect them, she says.

Providing answers and assistance to those who might miss out on the information otherwise is the reason Ms. Steinberg began volunteering with Ask-a-Lawyer eight years ago.

"I recognize the plight of many immigrants," she says. "I have done a lot of *pro bono* work and work for various agencies, and I do what I can, but many people in our community can't afford attorneys. They don't know what their rights are, and they live in fear, so I think (Ask-a-Lawyer) is an important public service."

Back at Mr. Stark Lilienthal's Nassau Street office, he continues talking about his lifelong interest in immigration. "If you can't admit (immigrants) are here, how can you help them? Back then, they were embraced so it was easier to assimilate."

He says his maternal grandfather, a physician, was able to establish a well-liked practice because the Long Island community embraced him. His paternal grandfather, a fireman and avid skier, worked first as a ski instructor at Lake Placid and later as a massage therapist.

Mr. Stark Lilienthal then chuckles, recalling a story about the day his great-grandparents took their citizenship test. His great-grandfather was so excited, he couldn't stop talking, to the point test administrators were becoming annoyed.

His grandmother, who tried to master English but just couldn't, had trouble understanding the administrators.

"Have you ever convicted a crime?" they asked.

She nodded "yes," thinking they had asked if she had any children.

"How many?"

"Five," she said, smiling.

"She had no idea what they were saying," Mr. Stark Lilienthal says, "but because my great-grandfather did so