RESTORATION IMMIGRATION LEGAL AID

Hope Together

ANNUAL REPORT 2022
Dear Friends,

Even from its small beginnings, RILA has sought to build something transformative. More than an organization, RILA set out to be a community of people who work together to love, serve, and pursue justice on behalf of our immigrant neighbors. Six years later, this is who we are—a dedicated group of staff, volunteers, partners, and RILA clients who work with relentless patience and compassion to advocate for those who need protection and safety.

I’m in awe of what God has done and is doing at RILA. We have grown exponentially from where we began. However, more than our external growth, I am in awe of what I see growing at RILA’s heart. Despite working in areas of suffering and darkness, at RILA’s center is an enduring compassion and softness of heart, faith, hope, and the conviction that God is with us and with RILA clients.

This year, we had the joy of seeing many RILA clients granted lawful status, following several years of waiting. In that waiting, the RILA community patiently and diligently walked with those clients through their immigration process, and also through many other challenges and joys in their lives. Now these clients are beginning a new chapter in which they can rest and walk forward without fear and with the knowledge of a safe and secure future.

RILA clients live in a reality that is “now, not yet.” There is the “now” of being safe from immediate harm in their home country, having an advocate on their side, having a work permit, or being granted status. But there is also the “not yet” since many RILA clients are still healing from past trauma that runs deep, learning a new language, navigating new systems, and working difficult jobs. There is respite now but still an uphill climb. Through our work, we try to level their paths as much as we can so that RILA clients can move forward in hope and step into something new.

I am so happy to share these stories with you and to give you a glimpse into RILA’s work and how RILA clients are starting their new chapters.

Natalie Foote, President/CEO
We seek to support immigrants in our community by providing excellent, pro bono immigration legal assistance to those who are most vulnerable and who have the fewest resources.
Santos knew that sports could keep kids safe and out of trouble. He says, “I recognized that it was the best way to encourage moving oneself away from bad company and vices. Consequently, I involved myself in making soccer teams of boys and girls of different ages, for which I bought sports equipment through my own efforts.”

Santos remembers that he was always satisfied to see young people move away from the gangs and dangerous situations when they started playing on his soccer teams.

Santos’s efforts led to a job with his municipal mayor’s office, which gave him the opportunity to reach more young people through a youth soccer program that recruited them away from gangs. “The youth just needed an opportunity, and I believed in giving it to them through the practice of soccer.”

But in 2016, gang members began to threaten his family and demanded he stop the program. “What I was doing was correct by my obligations to the community, but I did not think of the risk in which I put my children and family through my job to prevent violence through sports.”

“The threats [I] received day after day, [and] due to the degree of danger that the gangs represented, my life and my family no longer lived in peace. After the gangs killed my co-worker, Rosalidia, and then another friend and coworker, Luis, I decided to flee the country to be able to stay alive for my son, even if it was in another country.”

Just a few months ago, Santos was granted asylum, and now he wants to focus on his family and continue helping youth in the community. Santos continually gives thanks for the help he has received. He says, “All things through the hands of God are possible.”

Michelle Swearingen, Santos’s legal representative, says of him: “Working with Santos and his teenage son, Andres*, has been a source of joy for me this year. Santos and Andres are both incredibly kind, thoughtful, and bright.”

To help Santos, a natural-born storyteller, understand the parts of his story that the judge needed to hear, RILA’s Legal Director, Jason Braun, explained that Santos would have to once again go back into the worst days of his life to review each event in detail—and so he did.

“When the judge announced his decision,” remembers Michelle, “I watched Santos’s face. A normally animated man, he sat stoic, looking stunned. But once the court proceedings were concluded, his face turned towards his son, and they came together in a hard-won moment of joy. They had both worked so hard for so long, and finally, the door was opened for them. Santos is a man of deep faith, speaking blessing over me at every meeting and in every communication. Now we are able to petition for his wife and other son to join him here. We don’t always get the answer that we want, but when we do, it is like heaven breaking in, making wrong things right and setting people free, making all things new.”

*SName changed for safety
Khrystyna is Ukrainian. Her husband, Simon, is Uyghur. They live with their daughter around the corner from RILA, in Arlington VA.

Khrystyna says, “My husband worked near RILA, and every Sunday he saw a lot of nice people. My husband had asked me to visit the church several times. Then one day, I decided to visit Restoration Anglican Church for the first time for Easter with my baby, and it was a great experience.”

“After the war erupted in Ukraine in February, the U.S. government announced the Unitig for Ukraine program, which would allow my parents—who were by then stranded in a war-torn and conflict-ridden town of Ukraine—to come to the United States if we could find a sponsor. This was important because it was not safe for my parents to be in the middle of a war in their town. I decided to write a letter to RILA asking for assistance.”

“Fortunately, and with the mercy of God, a Restoration couple agreed to be sponsors. With their help, my parents were able to come and join us. We are very happy that my parents are safe now here in the U.S. with us. They lived in the most dangerous region of the country, the Donbas region. My parents are very happy right now with their granddaughter. They help us a lot.”

As we worked with Khrystyna, we learned that Simon had applied for asylum on his own and didn’t have an attorney to help him prepare for his upcoming hearing. Simon grew up in a region in Eastern China called Xinjiang, also known as East Turkestan. Simon left China to attend college in Turkey, and while he was studying, the Chinese government began to systematically oppress and persecute all Uyghurs living in China. His family members disappeared; he doesn’t know where they are or what happened to them.

A few months after Simon and Khrystyna were married, it became clear that Simon, as a Uyghur, was increasingly unsafe in Turkey. The Chinese and Turkish governments were working to locate and extradite Uyghurs back to China. There is now a formal extradition agreement between Turkey and China that streamlines the process of extraditing Uyghurs from Turkey to China.

Simon fled to the United States, and Khrystyna came a few months after him. Simon had a friend in Northern Virginia who offered the couple a place to stay until they could get on their feet. Just two months after they arrived in the United States, Russia invaded Ukraine, and neither Simon nor Khrystyna could return home. RILA now represents Simon in his asylum case, and Khrystyna says it has opened doors.

“Adjusting to our new life here in Virginia was not easy at first. We had to start everything from square one, but now with the help of generous and kind-hearted American people and government, we feel at home now. We have big dreams for the future. I am planning to get my beauty license this year, so that I can open my own beauty salon. My husband is currently finishing up his IT courses and should be able to get a job in the IT industry.”

We are so thankful to be a place where Simon and Khrystyna can find help when they need it most, that Khrystyna’s parents are reunited with their daughter and granddaughter, and that Simon has a strong advocate for his asylum case. Although Simon and Khrystyna have both lost so much, and their grief is real and deep, together they are building something new.

“WE HAVE BIG DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE.”
Simon & Khrystyna

Independence is the only way forward for East Turkistan.
From 1996 to 2001, Wida was a student in her mother’s secret school in Kabul during the first Taliban regime, as she and her sister were not permitted to attend school because they were girls. Her mother was repeatedly beaten by the Taliban for the crime of teaching women and girls, and her father was imprisoned. Below, Wida shares her story.

"After NATO and American forces arrived in Afghanistan, other schools for Afghan girls were established, and I was able to attend school and study to become a psychologist and sociologist.

Upon completing my education, I worked for many years in various positions with the Afghan government, which was backed by the U.S. government. This enabled me to defend the values of democracy, equal rights, women’s rights, and other important ideals. I was most recently a Senior Public Relations and Media Advisor to the Ministry of Justice until the Taliban took over Afghanistan.

Women in Afghanistan have had no access to the government for many generations, so there have been no avenues for them to report crimes committed against themselves, demand rights equal to those of their husbands and fathers, or protect their property rights, among other things. It was my responsibility to identify the issues that women were facing and to implement systemic changes that would allow them to engage with their government. I collaborated with the court system, the Department of Justice, the legislature, and the media to develop and publicize these programs.

Prior to that, I was the Director of International Monetary Fund programs in Afghanistan at the President’s Administrative Office, overseeing all IMF programs in Afghanistan. During my service for my country, the Taliban attempted to kill me three times, but they made a huge mistake: Since they couldn’t kill me, they killed my fear.

I never imagined that one day I would be forced to emigrate from my country and my home. On August 15th, my phone rang, and it was my mother asking me to come home as soon as possible, saying that the Taliban had taken over Kabul and that the city had been in chaos. Our office’s security guards arrived shortly after that phone call and asked us to leave as soon as possible. We left the office without retrieving our belongings.

As our vehicle approached the northern outskirts of Kabul, I saw the Taliban enter the city with fully armed tanks. Seeing their terrifying faces traumatized and shocked me. I was told to completely cover my face with my scarf so they wouldn’t recognize me. For safety, we turned off our phones and avoided all interactions with strangers. My family and I were in hiding.

"SINCE THEY COULDN’T KILL ME, THEY KILLED MY FEAR."
On August 24, we received a phone call from our American friends instructing us to go to the Kabul Airport. I took a taxi to the airport and covered my face completely so they wouldn’t know who I was. I can’t talk about the airport incident because I still have flashbacks and nightmares about it. Military planes transported us to Doha, Qatar. We didn't eat or drink for more than 42 hours. Then we were taken to an army camp that resembled a massive warehouse and housed approximately 5,000 evacuees. After nearly four nights, it was our turn to fly to Dulles Airport and Fort McCoy in Wisconsin. To be resettled, we had to stay at the military base for five months.

I was concerned about my family’s legal status. We didn’t have enough money to hire an attorney, so we asked friends. Finally, a friend introduced us to Michelle Swearingen at RILA, who aided us and gave us hope in the face of the prospect of being sent back to war. RILA assisted us so that we can have hope for a future in the United States.

Today, RILA assists us and provides us with the opportunity assist others. I don’t want our stories to fade and the world to forget Afghan Allies and the Afghan Nation in general as time passes. Afghan evacuees face new challenges and obstacles daily. I urge the United States and its government to recognize its allies and the sacrifices they have made by risking their lives to serve U.S. troops.”
In 1990, Congress created a legal pathway for immigrant children who have suffered abuse, abandonment, or neglect by a parent. A judge must determine that reunification with that parent is not possible, and it is in the child’s best interest to stay in the United States. This pathway is called Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS).

SIJS is a life-changing benefit to the children we serve, because their circumstances often leave them with few options to safely remain in the United States. SIJS is thankfully not a complicated process, but it does require knowledge of two completely different court systems and areas of law: family and immigration.

Seeing the need for this type of work in our area, RILA has taken on SIJS cases from its inception, successfully litigating 100 SIJS cases and currently carrying 158 cases. RILA routinely accepts SIJS referrals from other organizations, especially for difficult cases involving children who are about to age out of eligibility (18 years old in Virginia) or have complicated cases.

Our vision is for every single SIJS-eligible child in Northern Virginia to be represented. Although a big vision, we believe it’s possible and that we are uniquely equipped to accomplish it. Our dream for representation for every SIJS-eligible child in Northern Virginia will ensure that they have the protection and safety they need to flourish.

RILA helped Roberto and Julio apply for SIJS in 2020. And just this past year, both saw their visas approved. For 12-year-old Julio, a life in the United States means “more opportunities to become a soccer player.” But 18-year-old Roberto and their parents recognize the significance of their being granted status—the ability to live in safety as a family and rebuild their lives.

RILA will continue to walk with Roberto and Julio as they apply for the Green Cards and finish their education here in Northern Virginia.

**OUR YOUNGEST CLIENTS**

158 SIJS cases
Employment Authorization Documents (EADs), commonly known as work permits, are extremely important to RILA's clients because they allow clients to legally work and support their families in the U.S. as they wait for their asylum cases to be adjudicated. EADs also provide asylum-seekers with Social Security numbers, which are necessary in order to be employed.

Being legally employed is crucial for RILA clients, many of whom are among the most vulnerable in our communities. EADs are significant in preventing food and rent insecurity, as well as in protecting RILA clients from being exploited by their employers. Having a work permit opens opportunities for fair-paying jobs that simply do not exist for those who are not legally eligible to work. EADs make a way for immigrant families to support themselves, become independent, and begin to help others.

Esteban*

"Thank you so much for helping me get my work permit. Honestly, getting my work permit means a lot to me, because it not only opens a lot of new opportunities but it also helps me work where I want to and not where I have to."

*Name changed for safety

307 work permit applications submitted
Imagine that every client who walks through RILA’s doors is carrying a bag full of puzzle pieces. Each piece is part of their individual story—their formative experiences; their family life; their work and interests; their burdens, fears, hopes, and aspirations. Some pieces, for one reason or another, seem more salient to the client in that moment than others, yet these are not necessarily the pieces that would render the strongest legal argument for an asylum claim. As a staff attorney who focuses primarily on brief writing, my job is to sort through the client’s puzzle pieces and form a picture that an immigration judge will recognize as meeting the standard for relief.

It is, to many, the least “glamorous” part of the defensive asylum process. Drafting a brief has none of the action and drama of a court hearing. It lacks the intimacy and human connection of client interviews. Brief writing is often dry, quiet, laborious, and boring. It is an attorney sitting alone in front of a computer for hours and hours with a cluttered Word doc and a dozen different browser and PDF tabs open, sifting through piles of witness statements and news articles while jotting down notes on relevant case law.

There’s a good reason why legal dramas on TV or film rarely ever depict this aspect of litigation: it is the opposite of riveting.

Yet, drafting briefs is one of the most important things we do for our clients. The brief is the best opportunity we have to lay out a thorough, forceful argument for why someone should be granted asylum. In the case of appeals, it is truly our only opportunity, since those decisions are usually made “on the papers”—that is, based entirely on the strength of the arguments presented in the briefs and a review of the administrative record. And telling a client’s story to the decision maker in a manner that is not only personally compelling but also legally persuasive presents a distinct challenge.

When I draft a brief, I aim to make the client’s story feel both unique and familiar to the reader. Unique because each client is an individual with a singular set of experiences, specific and extraordinary in their own way; familiar because I want to position those experiences to fit into a recognizable legal framework. I try to write in a way that honors the client’s history and humanity—both the literal and figurative journey they’ve traveled—while also ticking all boxes necessary to build a winning claim.

I am, in essence, putting together as much of the puzzle as possible before the client ever steps foot into a hearing on the merits of their case. In the ideal scenario, the brief and evidence we’ve submitted present an image that is already so clear and complete that the immigration judge begins the hearing needing just the final few pieces in place (usually the client’s credibility on the stand) to rule in our favor. The heavy legal lifting has been done; the client’s only remaining task is to tell their story truthfully and sincerely in their own words.

Most, if not all, of our clients will never read the briefs we draft on their behalf. And it’s safe to assume that sepia-toned photos of intense brief writing will not be featured on RILA’s social media any time soon. But taking the stories our clients entrust to us—the highs and lows, the triumphs and traumas—and piecing together a way for them to make new stories in the U.S. is immensely vital and fulfilling work. And that beats riveting any day.
I volunteer at RILA because I know what it feels like to be a stranger and a foreigner. From 2006-2008, I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Azerbaijan. I lived with a host family that warmly welcomed me into their home and helped me as I was learning the language. My Azerbaijani friends and colleagues explained their customs and culture and patiently answered my questions. I am forever grateful for how I—the stranger and foreigner—was treated with kindness, generosity, and love.

Since my return, I have been working in and volunteering at organizations where I can extend the same hospitality and support to those who are strangers and foreigners in my country. I want them to know there are Americans who are excited to meet them, want the best for them, and are on their side.

During a RILA clinic, I was taking notes while a client was explaining an event that was important to his case and related to a holiday that is celebrated in his country. He was struggling with explaining the significance of the holiday when I realized it is the same holiday in Azerbaijan. When I interjected with the name of the holiday, his eyes went wide. He pulled down his mask, smiled broadly, and asked how I knew about it. It was a beautiful moment where we moved from being strangers to connected persons through a shared understanding. He even stayed after the session to talk about my time there and some similarities and differences between the two countries.

When I come to RILA, I look for ways to extend kindness, generosity, and love to our clients and their families. It is my way of paying it forward and, hopefully, helping others feel they are seen, heard, and supported.
**IT ALL ADDS UP**

**712 CLIENTS**  
413 ASYLUM  
158 SIJS  
37 LEGAL PERMANENT RESIDENCE  
65 OTHER HUMANITARIAN-BASED

**673 CASES**

THIS YEAR, THERE HAVE BEEN 54 ASYLUM PETITIONS FILED AND 10 FINAL ASYLUM HEARINGS. WE CELEBRATE THAT 14 INDIVIDUALS WERE GRANTED ASYLUM.

EACH ASYLUM HEARING TAKES:
- 3-5 years
- 10 hours to prepare the asylum application
- 30 hours to write a legal brief
- 25 hours to prepare evidence
- 6 hours to prepare testimony
- 5 hours in court

**FUNDING**

$344,467  
8% $28,504 FOUNDATIONS  
21% $71,587 CHURCHES  
5% $16,014 CORPORATE DONATIONS & OTHER  
66% $228,362 INDIVIDUALS  
10% $31,692 ADMINISTRATION  
10% $29,008 FUNDRAISING  
80% $242,853 PROGRAM  
21% $71,587 EXPENSES  
65 OTHER HUMANITARIAN-BASED

**EXPENSES**

$303,553  
$29,008 FUNDRAISING  
$31,692 ADMINISTRATION  
$303,553 FY21-22 EXPENSES  
$344,467 FY21-22 FUNDING  
$28,504 FOUNDATIONS  
$71,587 CHURCHES  
$16,014 CORPORATE DONATIONS & OTHER  
$228,362 INDIVIDUALS  
$242,853 PROGRAM  
$71,587 EXPENSES