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Nation of immigrants

Witness to changes

When attorney Tom Roach began practicing in Pasco in December 1983, immigration law was only a portion of his work. By 1994, it was 100 percent of his practice.

Roach has helped thousands of people from 97 countries spanning the globe from Australia to Yugoslavia.

In those days, farm workers were the majority of his clients, with 80 percent from Mexico, the remainder from Central America. "Now that is reduced by half or more," Roach said.

Today the bulk of his clients are still first-generation Latinos, but they are considered essential workers.

These workers fall into one of 10 low-skill job categories in which the United States has deemed there are more jobs than workers. They include farm workers, landscapers and restaurant and hotel workers.

While these cases make up the majority of Roach's clients, 5 percent to 10 percent are people who work at Hanford.

And during the past few years, Roach has seen what he calls a "subspecialty" emerge in his practice.

He has represented 77 foreign-trained doctors in their quest to get a work permit and eventually a green card. The doctors enter the country on J-1 visas, and if they practice in a medically underserved area they can qualify for a work permit.

But regardless of where they come from or the job they perform, all immigrants come to him with the same question, Roach said: "I want a green card. Can you get me a green card? Is it possible?"

Changing trends

In the past five years, Roach has seen many people emigrate from Russia, Ukraine and Eastern Europe.

Some came as religious refugees, others as fiancés. One was a wine maker from Romania.

The high-tech boom has brought many scientists and computer engineers from China to the Tri-Cities during the past



Pasco attorney Tom Roach shows a pile of files that represent the work he's done over the past six years to help Dr. Tómas Hernandez get his green card.

10 to 15 years, he said.

Roach also has seen a fair number of Canadians, especially in the last 10 years. "The economy is fairly stronger here and the dollar goes further," he said.

Immigration statistics for 2001 show that Mexico had the most legal immigrants coming to the United States with 206,426. India followed with 70,290. China came in third with 56,426.

Roach said immigration trends follow world events. When there is a "seismic shift" because of political or religious upheaval in their home countries, immigrants come, settling initially in major population centers.

"Then, over time, they filter to the smaller areas like the Tri-Cities," he said.

Myriad reasons

Immigrants come to the United States for many reasons, said Susan Hardwick, professor of geography and a cultural geographer at the University of Oregon in Eugene.

Although many people believe immigrants come to work in the fields, "In many cases they are highly educated and really motivated," she said.

Washington is No. 1 in the nation for new arrivals from Russia and Ukraine, Hardwick said. Many are fundamental Christians who emigrated as religious refugees because they were persecuted in their home country.

Getting to the United States can be a long, involved process. The average time to receive a green card is five to six months, but that can vary widely, Roach

said.

A physician can wait three to five years before getting a green card. A person filing a green card request for a brother or sister may have to wait 20 years.

A long process

A green card is only the first step. Once a person receives the card, he or she must wait five years before becoming a citizen. If a green card holder is married to a U.S. citizen, the wait is only three years.

At one time, few laws governed immigration. In fact, the United States encouraged open immigration during the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Things began to change a bit with passage of the Steerage Act of 1819, the first significant federal law relating to immigration.

The act somewhat restricted the number of passengers on ships coming to and leaving the United States. It also called for the creation of records documenting the arrival of immigrants at seaports.

The Immigration Act of 1891 tightened things even more by setting the first comprehensive law for immigration control.

The act established the Bureau of Immigration under the Treasury Department to administer all immigration laws.

And it further restricted the people allowed to enter the country to exclude felons, polygamists and persons suffering from certain contagious diseases.

When World War I began, immigration from Europe slowed. After the war, Congress

enacted the national origins quota system. The Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924 set quotas based on past census figures.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the U.S.-Mexican border was open and Mexicans traveled freely between the two countries. In 1924, Congress created the U.S. Border Patrol, which led to rigorous enforcement at ports of entry.

What's next?

History shows U.S. immigration policies will change, but no one knows how.

Dan Tichenor, professor of political science at Rutgers University in New Jersey, predicts legal immigration will continue "pretty close to the current rate."

He expects more patrols at the Canadian and Mexican borders because of terrorism concerns since 9/11. But he has not seen any indications the federal government will scale back legal immigration.

If the diversity evident in the Mid-Columbia is any indication, people will continue to come to the United States -- just like the English, Irish, Swedes and Italians before them -- in search of a better life.

Whether they come to worship freely, or to flee an oppressive regime, or for the chance to put their education to work, they will become threads in the fabric that weaves this immigrant nation together.

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