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Changing the Face of America

How Sheela Murthy went from immigrant to immigration lawyer

Sheela Murthy grew up in India, where opportunity was

dependent upon social status and women were viewed as misfortunes. Worse, she chose to become a lawyer. "In India," she explains with a laugh, "being a lawyer is for the dregs of humanity. The biggest morons in the world do law; the smartest minds go to medicine or engineering."

This view was reinforced by her father (an engineer) and two sisters (both doctors). It wasn't until she graduated first in her class at Bangalore University and went to Harvard that they looked upon her achievements with pride. But her fight for acceptance wasn't over.

Attempting to become a U.S. citizen, Murthy says, "I had such an unpleasant, unprofessional experience dealing with an immigration lawyer. The lawyer never returned phone calls, only called me once in three years to ask me for more fees. I thought, 'God! This person is treating me—a fellow colleague, a lawyer from Harvard Law School—in this fashion. I dread to think how this lawyer must be treating [others].'"

The experience taught Murthy that there was a niche in America for an immigration lawyer who was not only bright, but also sympathetic to clients' needs. After a short stint in corporate and real estate law, she opened her own immigration law firm in Owings Mills, just outside Baltimore.

From the outset, the way she did business was different. For one thing, she spent a good deal of money and time in the early 1990s creating a Web site (Murthy.com) that deals with immigration issues. On the site, Murthy hosts live chats and posts articles for anyone interested in immigration law.

"The number of people who use our free services is obviously far in excess of the number of people that hire us," she says. "And that is perfectly fine with us. We want to help a lot of people; we want to provide information to a lot of people."

Then there was her natural empathy with her clients. "I would tell them, 'Don't worry, I have been in your place; we will take care of you; here is exactly what we plan to do. And if you find that anyone on my team isn't available or answering your questions to your full

satisfaction, don't hesitate to call me or e-mail me personally.'"

The calls and the questions have been more frequent since 9/11. New government restrictions have been imposed that make immigration law significantly more cumbersome.

"[The Homeland Security Act] added more layers and complications," says Murthy. "[Getting a green card] used to be two to three years; now it's closer to five, and it could go up to 10 or 15 years for people with lesser education and lesser work experience."

Though these new restrictions won't have as large an impact on most of Murthy's clients, who tend to be highly educated and skilled, she believes America is hurting itself with its new restrictions.

"In most other cultures," she says, "you don't work, you don't eat that day. And that's not a concept that many Americans are used to. ... America is a nation of immigrants, and our greatness, in my opinion, lies in the fact that we open our arms to the best and the brightest from around the world. By forgetting our own history and our own



past, we are hurting our nation and hurting our talents."

One of Murthy's biggest thrills comes from helping those who have run out of options, people who have all but packed up after being told their cases are hopeless. When she fights for them and wins, it validates her own struggle and all the hard choices she made along the way.

"Think of the lives that we change on a daily basis," she says. "We're changing the face of America every single day with every single family, and we're not just changing the lives of these families, we're changing the lives of future generations that will forever owe this great nation for having helped them."

—Bill Glose