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November 11, 2021

Law School News

'You Have to Adapt to Survive'

How does a newly established immigration law practice weather a hostile administration and a global pandemic? Ask Boston attorney Antonio Massa Viana '14.

November 11, 2021

| Michael M. Bowden



Boston attorney Antonio Massa Viana '14 made headlines soon after passing the Massachusetts bar exam, when he became the first known unauthorized immigrant to earn a law license.

In 2016, after securing a green card, Viana was admitted to practice in the Ocean State as well (where he'd passed the bar two years earlier). At his swearing-in ceremony in 2016, Chief Justice Paul A. Suttell commented that Viana had taken "a rather circuitous route to the Rhode Island bar – not for a lack of competence or character, I might add."

By that time, in fact, Viana had been a solo practitioner in Massachusetts for well over a year.

“I actually started working the Monday after I took the bar exam,” Viana said. By day, he was a counselor with the Massachusetts Immigrant & Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA). By night, he was preparing to establish his own law firm, which he did in January 2015, opening Massa Viana Law. Tagline: “A Law Firm for Immigrants, by Immigrants.”

“That was quite a challenge, as an attorney fresh out of law school,” Viana said, with a note of pride. Little did he suspect that his fledgling practice was about to be hit by two consecutive tsunamis: the administration of President Donald J. Trump, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Trump Years

Like any new lawyer flying solo, Viana found himself working impossibly long and difficult hours as he honed both his legal chops and his business management skills.

“It’s not easy running a law practice,” he said. “It’s not easy practicing law. And it certainly wasn’t easy being an immigration lawyer during four years of Trump. For me to be starting out right before he took office, specifically practicing immigration, an area that the administration targeted passionately, vociferously – that was really tough.”

Viana spent the early months of the Trump presidency leading countless “Know Your Rights” workshops for immigrants.

“They would fill up with people who were incredibly fearful about what they are going to do after spending 15, 20 years living in this country,” he said. “I told my team to be patient and compassionate, because these people were under immense pressure. They could sometimes be difficult to deal with. I told my team, ‘Listen, it’s not personal. Just put yourself in their shoes; think about what they’re going through. Realize that we’re not only their best friends during this time; we’re also the repository of all their hopes, and sometimes also their angst.’”

Meanwhile, Viana’s colleagues on the immigration bar were also feeling the strain.

“I mean, the solutions were being taken away from us one by one,” he said. “We had a joke that we’d started hating Fridays, because every Friday something else would happen: a change in regulations, a new interpretation of law, some memorandum coming out of the administration that would instantly affect maybe 30, 40 cases in which we had relief and then, all of a sudden, we didn’t have relief.”

Yet in many ways, Viana said, the Trump years built up a “comrades-in-arms” solidarity among immigration attorneys.

“We found comfort in our colleagues,” he said. “A lot of us would call one another and say, ‘By the way, how are you holding up?’ Immigration law can be really draining work in the best of times, both emotionally and physically. But we’re a passionate breed and we love what we do.

And in a sense, the Trump years motivated us to raise our game and become even better at what we do.”

The Pandemic

Then in 2020, COVID-19 pandemic hit and Viana’s practice found itself facing yet another existential challenge that somehow turned out for the best. It began for him as it did for many other businesses – with a sort of confused optimism.

“I remember when I closed the office on March 13,” he said. “I told everybody, ‘We’ll be back by April 1. They’ll lock down for two weeks, the virus will pass, and then we’ll get back to work.’ But that obviously didn’t happen.”

What did happen – again, as with many businesses – was a technological upgrade and a new flexibility.

“The pandemic really made us a better, more effective practice,” Viana said. He and his staff got up to speed on Zoom, enabling both office meeting and client consultations to resume almost immediately. “That actually allowed us to reach more people outside of our physical area,” he said. “So today I have consultations with people all over the world, in part because of the pandemic.”

He also upgraded the office phone system, introduced new case management software, and offered more flexible work options to his staff. Still, it wasn’t all positivity -- especially in the beginning.

“It was tough financially,” he said. “It was a struggle – because business really fell off for a while.” A few weeks into the pandemic, he gathered his staff on Zoom. “I told them, ‘Look, we only have so much of a budget and I may need to let some of you go temporarily, at least until we figure things out financially.’”

He was taken aback by their response.

“One by one, they all replied, ‘Even if we’re not getting paid, we still want to keep working, because we believe in the work we do. We believe in this firm. One of the attorneys who works with me said, ‘If you can’t pay me, you can’t pay me. But let’s keep the cases moving, and things will get sorted out eventually.’”

Viana pauses with emotion.

“I’m shaking as I remember it,” he said. “Even now I’m getting goosebumps. All I could think was, ‘I have such an amazing team.’”

Sure enough, business soon bounced back and the office flow resumed.

“We worked remotely for a while,” Viana said. “Then we slowly started coming back to the office, with social distancing. You have to adapt to survive, and that’s what we did. In fact, we grew over the past year, both in terms of staff and in the number of cases we take. We became a better firm, and I became a better business owner – and a better lawyer, too.”

The Long Road to Residency

Of course, Viana is no stranger to adapting and surviving.

Born in Brazil with many U.S. connections, he spent years living and working here: a homeowner, a taxpayer, and the father of three U.S.-born children, Cecilia, Francisco, and Joaquim (now 19, 17, and 13, respectively). Their mother Lelia, who hails from Argentina, became a U.S. citizen in 2015, enabling Viana to obtain a U.S. green card. Most of his other relatives were American citizens as well, including his mother (naturalized after his birth) and two older siblings.

But lawyers advised Viana that there was no avenue – through family or through work – for him to apply for a green card. So he went to law school instead. Roger Williams University School of Law, to be precise, where he was accepted and welcomed notwithstanding his immigration status.

Despite juggling work, family obligations, and a withering daily commute from the Boston area, Viana soon proved himself a superstar: excelling in his classes; becoming editor of the law review; winning the Esther Clark Moot Court competition, as well as the national Religious Freedom Moot Court Tournament at George Washington University Law School; and earning the high regard of faculty, staff and fellow students alike.

He has returned that regard. The 12-person staff at his Framingham, Mass., office includes associate attorney Amanda LaRocca '21. Last summer, 2L Victor Vieira was a summer intern. The firm is moving into a larger space in January.

Viana also believes that his long, complicated road to residency helps clients relate to and trust him -- which in turn probably contributes to his success.

“I’m not the only one out there with a crazy story; there are thousands of those stories playing out every day in America – especially with the DACA kids right now,” he said. “But there are also people who have been here for 30 years, who have spouses and children, who own very successful businesses – and yet they don’t have legal status. It makes no sense.

“Unfortunately, immigration law is incredibly complex,” he added. “I still don’t think people understand why we need reform so badly. Politicians have been talking about comprehensive immigration reform forever, but it’s rarely politically convenient. So it always seems to take a back seat to whatever is politically convenient.”

Luckily for his clients, Viana is there to keep fighting for them under the system as it currently exists.

“It’s gratifying despite the occasional frustrations, because I get to be an instrument to effect change in so many people’s lives every day,” he said. “It’s truly amazing, the difference that you can make in this line of work.”