

*“Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed, to me”:*

*Immigration Lawyer Dan Larsson*

In the lobby of Dan Larsson’s office, a neon American flag glows brightly atop a wooden bookcase. In the corner, beside a rack of magazines, the Larsson Immigration Group has placed an overflowing box of toys. At first glance, both items seem out of place in a law office, and yet they serve as obvious reminders of the unique nature of immigration law. As an advocate for immigrants looking to live, work, or marry in the United States, Dan Larsson’s clients often arrive confused, desperate to make a life for themselves and their children in a land with greater opportunity. And like the neon flag in the lobby, many are looking to Larsson as a bright symbol of possibility, hoping that he will be able to help them through the increasingly complex procedures required to become an American citizen. In immigration law, the stakes are high, for client, lawyer, and families alike. As Larsson puts it, “immigration law is like a medical procedure. Because what’s at stake? Your life.”

Like his clients, Dan Larsson himself came to America as an immigrant. Born in 1962 in Nyköping, Sweden, approximately sixty miles south of Stockholm, Larsson’s sojourns abroad started as a young child. Due to Sweden’s relatively generous vacation policies, Larsson and his family enjoyed numerous opportunities to travel and camp across Europe, frequently venturing into Poland to visit his mother’s side of the family. Through travel, Larsson was exposed to international politics at a young age, and he remembers well the experience of being searched by soldiers while passing through the Iron Curtain as a child. “I think that’s what got me interested in politics and law,” explains Larsson.

The idea of visiting America was first planted in Larsson while swimming competitively in high school. Many of his teammates spent time in the United States as exchange students and

came back with fond memories. "I liked traveling through Europe," says Larsson, "so I thought that would be an interesting thing to do." In 1979, when Larsson was seventeen, he moved to Whitefish, Montana to spend a year as an exchange student. In Montana, Larsson was exposed to America, and to American football. A successful athlete at home, Larsson caught onto the game quickly, earning a spot as the starting kicker on the team that would go on to win the state championship.

With plans to attend college in the States, Larsson returned to Sweden to finish high school and serve a required year in the national military. Ever the traveler, Larsson was shipped north to the Arctic Circle to serve as a Swedish Mountain Ranger. When his time was up, Larsson immediately began shopping for schools in the U.S. As Larsson readily admits, there were things about Sweden that he would eventually miss. "Growing up in Sweden, it's a neutral country. The population as a whole is a lot more knowledgeable about politics and the world. That makes it easier to see both sides of an issue."

Nevertheless, Larsson was ambitious and anxious to return to America. World-savvy, but anxious for some level of support during college, Larsson thought about either returning to Montana to be near those he had during his year of high school, or venturing further west to the University of Oregon, close to a family that had hosted his sister as an exchange student. At the time, Eugene, Oregon was known as a marathoner's city and for Larsson, who had moved on to long-distance running, that factor tipped the balance. An old friend from his high school days in Montana, starting as Center for the Ducks football team, even tried to convince Larsson to walk onto the team. But by then, Larsson's interests were changing, moving away from competitive sports.

“I did well in college, but I actually started to do more and more of what my hobby was, which was music,” says Larsson. Singing lead and playing the bass for “Secret Agent,” Larsson dedicated himself to the band throughout college and even made a go for two years after graduating. The band enjoyed some success, making it onto a compilation of Oregon’s best rock songs. Ironically, however, Larsson’s competitive spirit resurfaced, and the athlete who could measure success on the field or track grew increasingly uncomfortable with the elusive nature of success in the music industry.

“There are lots of extremely good and talented musicians that never go anywhere, and unlike being a sprinter or a runner, you have to be talented but there is a clear winner when you get to the finish line. With music, as with the arts, you can be very good and you may still starve,” explains Larsson.

In search of a profession that would reward the hard work he was willing to put in, Larsson moved back to Sweden with plans to save money for law school. “I’ve always been interested in the world,” says Larsson. “Even while playing music, I never just partied, I kept up with world news and politics.”

In 1991, Larsson enrolled at Seattle University School of Law. His interest in world politics and diplomacy drew him to an immigration class and into an immigration clinic, but throughout law school, Larsson was still convinced that he would practice international corporate law. After getting involved with the Swedish-American Chamber of Commerce during school and meeting an attorney at Seattle’s then-largest law firm, Bogle & Gates, Larsson took a job with the firm his first summer to practice in their international business group. In many ways, Larsson enjoyed the experience, but perceptively recognized the ups and downs. “It was a big

firm with a lot of resources, and they wine and dine you as an intern but then they work you to death.”

In his second summer, Larsson decided to try a Seattle firm with a more manageable size. At Mullavey, Prout, Grenley & Foe, he worked with approximately twenty attorneys on corporate cases and got his first taste of an immigration caseload. Larsson accepted a job with Mullavey, Prout after school and soon got his first look at something not taught in law school, “the economics of how firms work.” To keep the firm financially sound, Larsson was expected to bill heavy hours, but he was also not being handed enough clients. That forced Larsson to find his own clients, a good experience for a lawyer with lurking thoughts about opening his own firm.

Besides the billables and the stress of finding his own clients, there were other things that bothered Larsson about his day-to-day practice. For one thing, Larsson had less flexibility in choosing the cases he was allowed to work on. For another, Larsson found his experience with corporate litigation unpleasant. “I really didn’t enjoy working against other lawyers. The U.S. system is an adversarial system. You find out fairly quickly that it doesn’t really matter what is right and what the truth is. It’s more a question of how much money can you afford? Of course, you still need the facts and the law on your side but that doesn’t mean you’re going to win.”

For the athlete and former musician that had expected to find due reward in the courts of law, such a realization must have been frustrating. The combination of Larsson’s frustration and the increasing realization that he was effectively generating his own clients without enjoying the financial or professional rewards of his footwork helped Larsson make a pivotal decision. Larsson decided to open his own Seattle firm, and to try a field of law that appealed to him more than commercial litigation.

Although Larsson suggests that he “stumbled” into the practice of immigration law, the decision makes perfect sense in retrospect. After all, by working with immigrants that hoped to live and work in America, Larsson realized he could “stay involved in international business and to some extent litigation in a different way, and actually be helping people.”

Not only that, Larsson also found the daily practice much more amenable to his personality. “In general litigation, you generally start out with people who are angry to begin with, either because they are a certain somebody or because they are being sued. It’s just not a very pleasant thing. And it depends upon what kind of person you are, but I didn’t find it very fun to do. And in immigration law, our adversary is the U.S. government, which doesn’t always mean that it’s going to be adversarial. You represent people, foreign nationals that want to come here to work, live, marry, whatever the case may be. Your clients in immigration are happy to have your help. So you don’t start out with angry people.” Larsson also found it easier to work with other attorneys since all private immigration lawyers are on the same side. “As immigration lawyers, you help each other out. It’s a very collegial area of the law.”

Since 1996, Larsson has been his own and only boss. He continues to seek new business, but now no one else profits off his efforts. And the work increasingly finds him. “If you have knowledge and you communicate and have good customer service, then you have good results. There’s really nothing magic about it.”

Larsson’s firm now represents immigrants from all over the world, and has handled cases in close to fifteen states. As a lawyer in a field that changes constantly, Larsson notes that “it’s a very rewarding thing, and it’s very challenging. And it doesn’t get boring.” Perhaps what makes the role so interesting is the critical role that Larsson plays in the life of his clients. In addition to being a lawyer, “you have to be a social worker,” says Larsson. The complexity and

consequences of the immigration system are so daunting that in some cases, it may be better not to explain too much. Instead of getting bogged down in the minutia, Larsson tries to fight for his clients in the courtroom, and support them in their daily life.

“I have to try to convince people that I know what I’m doing,” said Larsson. It is important to constantly remind them, “you have the law on your side. Go through the process and you should be successful.”

Fortunately, it worked out that way for one of Larsson’s recent clients, a Ukrainian immigrant named Inessa looking to make a life for herself and her thirteen year-old son in Oregon. Inessa moved to Oregon in the spring of 2000 on a three-month visa, planning to marry a man who lived in Medford. Before the wedding could take place, however, both parties changed their mind and the wedding was called off. Just months later, she met Steve Polk, a cook in a Russian restaurant in Medford. The two married and she applied for legal status shortly thereafter. The couple figured she eventually would receive a green card, allowing her to stay.

Meanwhile, the couple moved on with their new lives, buying a home and the Russian restaurant, with plans to run it together. Unfortunately for the Polks, federal regulations required that Inessa return to the Ukraine after plans to marry the other person were canceled, then reapply from her country of origin through the visa process. Inessa and her son were sent back to the Ukraine while the government processed her new visa.

For nearly a year, Inessa and her son struggled to get by in Odessa. She had trouble finding a job in the slumping economy, and her son missed a year of school in the States. While in Odessa, Inessa admitted to a local Oregon paper, “I’m so upset and depressed — my son is

very upset. I did nothing wrong. I just want to be over there with Steve. It's everything like dream for me with him. I can't believe this happened so quick to us."

At the same time, Steve Polk was losing close to \$40,000 on costs associated with Inessa's deportation and due to her absence in the restaurant. Eventually, through Larsson's work on her behalf, the Polks were reunited, and Steve told the local paper that despite the challenge, they would move on. "We are both young and strong and we don't give up," he said. "We are going to recover from this and move forward."

Along with the success stories, there are increasing challenges for Larsson. Undoubtedly, 9/11 has affected everyone, but at least professionally, it has impacted immigration lawyers disproportionately. Congress has increased restrictions on immigration, and that means additional complications for those looking to make a life in the U.S. It can also mean undergoing experiences that are likely to shake an immigrant's faith in the American legal system.

"Over the last couple years unfortunately, after 9/11, it's become very challenging. The government has taken an increasingly narrow look at the law and how to deal with things," says Larsson. "There has been a big erosion of due process after 9/11. And we see it more than just about anyone else because it's very difficult to fight the U.S. government. And if they don't give you access to people, there is not much you can do about it."

Despite the challenges, Larsson does not give the impression that he would rather be doing anything else. In fact, says Larsson, it is only more important today than ever to make sure that there is somebody protecting the constitutional and due process rights of immigrants. "It's rewarding to get somebody here, for a family to be able to stay here."

Today, Larsson oversees an office that includes support staff, another attorney who came to Larsson after spending years helping Microsoft employees through the immigration process, and his wife, a non-practicing attorney who manages the firm's operations. In 2002, Larsson and his wife moved the firm to Bend, Oregon, a town of just under 60,000, and a three-hour drive southeast of Portland. Bend is too small to justify an immigration practice like Larsson's, and he finds himself traveling frequently to support a client base that principally resides elsewhere.

The advantages and disadvantages of running such a small but flexible office are obvious. On the one hand says Larsson, "the downside of running a small firm by yourself is that when you go on vacation, you don't make any money. But at the same time, if you want to take half a day off to go skiing, you don't have to ask for anyone's permission." For someone constantly frustrated by the lack of correlation between effort and results, there is an important additional benefit to running your own law firm. "Whatever you put in is what will come back out."

For Larsson, running his own small operation in a field of law that appeals to him personally and politically makes perfect sense. But in a way, that is the only lesson Larsson draws from his professional path. Not that working in a big firm or doing corporate litigation is bad *per se*. Simply that it was not the right fit for him. In fact, says Larsson, he hopes that law students will work in a big firm if that appeals to their personality and to their professional dreams. "It is good to try different things. I'm glad that I got the experience of working in a big firm. I'm glad I got to work in a smaller firm. I didn't realize that I was going to be an immigration lawyer in a small town when I went to law school. You just don't quite know, it's good to get as many experiences as you can, and you'll figure out what your passion is."

At the same time, it is clear that Larsson has trouble understanding why a lawyer would stay in a job that fails to make them happy. "Like with any job, whatever you choose to do, you

need to be passionate about what you're doing. If you find a firm, is it fun? If it's not fun, it's not worth it."

In all probability, the idea of starting one's own firm is attractive to many lawyers and law students. But for many, the prospect seems terribly risky, fraught with the potential for failure and financial struggle. Interestingly, for Larsson that is a backwards way of looking at the enterprise. After all, says Larsson, no one is ever going to look after your professional career like yourself. As proof, Larsson points to the fate of Bogle & Gates, the firm that he summered with after his first year of law school, and once the largest firm in Seattle. A merger was proposed, and the firm split over differing opinions, some in favor of the move and some opposed. Many young lawyers were left behind.

"The reality is just because you have a job at a big firm doesn't mean you can keep it," says Larsson. "The only person you can count on is yourself." At some point, says Larsson, "I realized that if I wanted to take control of my own destiny, you can do that by starting your own firm."

No one would argue with the fact that Larsson has taken control of his destiny. Like everything else about his career, the choice to move to Bend, a city with a small town feel, was a deliberate choice. To Larsson, the motivating factor was not just that he and his wife had grown up in smaller towns and that Bend offered a ten-minute commute and nearby skiing.

More importantly, the move was inspired by the birth of his son. "Especially after we had our son, living in the big city, being professionals is hard," explains Larsson. "Once we realized that what we do, we didn't have to be in the city to do it, we started to look for a smaller town. Bend is a better place for our son to grow up."

The combination of working for himself in a smaller town allows Larsson to take time off to go to his son's school functions and be a more present father, something he clearly takes seriously. "It's my time and I can decide what to do with it. If I miss work, I'll make it up another time."

When one examines Larsson's life in its entirety, the line between his own story and that of his clients begins to blur. Like all of his clients, Larsson himself is an immigrant drawn to the opportunities that America offers. Like many of them, he is willing to work hard and make precarious choices to ensure that his children are safe and given even greater opportunities. An emigrant of big firm life and big city living, as Larsson continues to fight for other immigrants, it seems that he at least has finally found home.