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# the Immigrant's Story

Christy Han Mohan has one, and she says it's the key to immigration law

BY MICHAEL ESTRIN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DUSTIN SNIPES

WHEN CHRISTY HAN MOHAN HANDS YOU HER CARD, YOU SEE the usual: name, contact info, address. Then there's a U.S. flag. This last part is less patriotism than the point of her practice. Han Mohan, an immigrant herself, works exclusively on immigration cases. She helps create Americans.

"What people often don't understand when you say you're an immigration attorney is that there are so many faces to immigration," she says. "All kinds of people come to America from all over the world."

Some of Han Mohan's clients are wealthy, others are struggling. Some have advanced degrees in medicine and law, others never finished high school. A few work service industry jobs, while others are attempting to come to the U.S. on a business visa. Sometimes a client's employer foots the bill; sometimes cash-strapped clients work out a deal with Han Mohan. They are a group as diverse as the country they seek to join.

Han Mohan explains all of this in the conference room she reserves whenever she meets a new client. "I want my clients to feel as comfortable as possible," she says.

Putting people at ease was Han Mohan's style even when she was a defense civil litigator with Berger Kahn in Irvine.

"She's very poised and she doesn't rattle," says Lance A. LaBelle, the Berger Kahn principal who hired Han Mohan. "But her greatest skill is her ability to connect with people."







Han Mohan with her Aunt Kim in Hawaii in 1981. "Sometimes people wouldn't pay my parents," she says. "It's awful, but there are people out there who take advantage of immigrants."

Han Mohan knows her way around the byzantine maze of federal immigration forms. She also knows it's the client's story that matters.

"Immigration law is very different from the rest of the law," she says. "Unless it's a deportation hearing, it's not adversarial at all. What it's really about is trying to tell the immigrant's story through their application."

Some might assume immigration officers, who read the applications, are bureaucrats at best and heartless gatekeepers at worst. Experience has taught Han Mohan otherwise.

"Immigration officers can be really kind and have big hearts," she says. "When they review my client's application I want them to say to themselves, 'This person really deserves to be here.'"

Sometimes the review process occurs only on paper. Forms are filed, and months later, sometimes years later, the client gets a decision. It's the waiting that's stressful. Face-to-face interviews can add an extra level of anxiety. Han Mohan always goes along for these interviews, even though she's not there to argue on her client's behalf.

"The client does the talking," she says. "I tell them to tell the truth and to be confident. Sometimes my practice is a lot like being a psychologist or a coach."

What the client is doing is putting a human face to his or her story. It's a story that's often moving.

As is Han Mohan's.

#### IN JUNE 1979, HAN MOHAN'S FAMILY

knew they had to leave Vietnam.

In the four years since the last U.S. helicopter flew out of Saigon, the North not only consolidated its power and unified the country, it vowed to expel the country's ethnic Chinese population—citing, without apparent irony, concerns that such minorities couldn't be counted as loyal communists.

"To encourage the Chinese to depart, they have been subjected to harassment, including loss of jobs, closure of schools, curfews, intimidation by the police and the creation of detention camps," *The New York Times* reported at the time.

Han Mohan's family is ethnically Chinese.

"My father was a cyclo driver, my mother sold food out of the house," Han Mohan says. "They didn't have a lot of money, and they wanted a better opportunity for their children."

So they sold what they had and borrowed what they could to purchase one-ounce gold pieces. The gold went to a boat captain, one of thousands who began ferrying Vietnamese to countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Australia. With about a hundred other refugees, Han Mohan's parents, her grandmother and an aunt boarded a rickety boat with a pair of small children—Han Mohan and her older brother, Dihn.

"When I think about what they did, getting on this boat with a 1-year-old and a 3-year-old, I don't know if I could have done it," she says. "They could only take

what they could carry on their body. They were packed in like sardines."

The journey lasted weeks. Food was scarce, the passengers were exposed to the elements, and for a time the boat lost power and simply drifted with the tide. Eventually it ran aground in shallow waters near Hong Kong. They were lucky. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees estimates that more than 250,000 Vietnamese boat people died at sea during the exodus, victims of disease, starvation, storms and pirates.

In Hong Kong, the family was housed in a dirty warehouse along with hundreds of other refugees. There was no privacy. They slept in dormitory-style bunk beds stacked three or four high. The prefab meals given to them upon arrival soon disappeared.

"If they didn't work, we wouldn't eat," Han Mohan says. "So everyday [my parents] would go to a factory and grandma would watch the kids."

During their nine months in camp, they hooked up with a refugee organization, Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, which was bringing refugees to the U.S. under the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act. And in March 1980, less than a year after they left Vietnam, they flew to Honolulu, and with the help of the U.S. government found a small apartment in a working class neighborhood.

Han Mohan doesn't have many memories of Hawaii, but last year she and her husband went to the island for vacation and she found the family's first home in America. "It was tiny," she says. "Two people live there now and they are really cramped. Six of us lived in that one-bedroom apartment."

The family also learned a harsh lesson about immigrant life in America. "Sometimes people wouldn't pay my parents," says Han Mohan. "It's awful, but there are people out there who take advantage of immigrants."

That's why immigrants tend to stick together. And it's why, a year later, Han Mohan's family settled in Rosemead, Calif., a community with a large Vietnamese population, including several of their relatives.

There, her mother became a licensed manicurist and made a 75-mile round-trip commute to her place of employment in Reseda. Her father worked construction,

did odd jobs, and eventually worked with his wife at her salon business. "My parents worked six days a week," Han Mohan recalls. "They'd say goodbye to us in the morning and we wouldn't see them until 9 at night. Sundays were the only family day."

In school, Han Mohan learned English fast. She also learned to speak up for her parents. As early as third grade, she'd accompany her father to the store when he had trouble returning something. She'd talk to beauty school administrators when her mother wanted to take an extra class. She was their advocate.

"I guess I was kind of a young lawyer back then," Han Mohan says. "I was a chatterbox and I wasn't afraid to speak on my parents' behalf."

Han Mohan went on to University of Southern California, graduated with a business degree in three years, and landed a job with Deloitte Consulting. Her parents were proud; their daughter had made it. They were taken aback when she told them she was quitting to go to law school at the University of Minnesota.

Says Robert Han, the youngest of the three children, and the only one in the family born in the U.S., "They didn't understand why she wanted to start all over again. But eventually they understood. Because they had stressed how important it was to have an education. Because the more you know in America, the better off you'll be."

#### **IN 2000, A YEAR AFTER GRADUATING**

from USC, Han Mohan traveled with her mother and a few cousins to visit Quy Nhơn, where the family had lived in Vietnam. They met with relatives who stayed behind, and Han Mohan got a glimpse of what life might have been like if her family had stayed. "From the minute I got off the plane in Ho Chi Minh City and during my entire trip, it was organized chaos: loud, with people everywhere," she says. "I didn't know where to look."

A few incidents stand out. She witnessed a man being hit by a car, who was helped by strangers, but she never saw or heard an ambulance. She saw a man with no lower limbs using his hands to "walk" around the

city. "He was an older gentleman and it broke my heart," she says.

It was an eye-opening journey. "It's so important to know where you come from because it makes you appreciate what you have," she says.

Two years ago, Han Mohan began another journey: She opened her own firm, focusing exclusively on immigration law. "I want immigrants to be able to get good representation and not worry that someone is going to take their money," she says.

LaBelle, her mentor, wasn't surprised by the move. "She cares so deeply about people," he says. "Even when she was with us, she was always looking for ways to serve the community."

Her firm has no associates, no paralegals, no assistants. She prides herself on the close relationship she builds with her clients; she knows their stories intimately.

"You see common themes of hard work and sacrificing so the next generation can have a better life," she says. "My story isn't all that different." 