

I Want to Be a . . . Lawyer

Clients Get Help Understanding Immigration Rules

Allison Rutland Soulen is a lawyer. Some lawyers work in large offices with fancy furniture and beautiful views. Rutland Soulen works out of the basement of an Arlington church. Often her clients can't afford to pay for her legal help, but that's okay with her. She doesn't charge much, if anything.

Eleven years ago Rutland Soulen co-founded Just Neighbors, a group that provides legal services to immigrants and educates the community. Immigration law is very complex. There are many rules about who can and cannot live in this country, and that can make it difficult for people to know and understand their options.

"I wanted to help people who otherwise wouldn't have access to the help," says Rutland Soulen, 47.

As a kid, she didn't know what she wanted to be when she grew up. She majored in English at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, and then taught high school in Georgia. That was when she realized that many people needed legal aid and couldn't afford it.

So Rutland Soulen went to law school for three years at Yale University in Connecticut.

Many businesses, including sports teams and newspapers, need lawyers. So does the government. Some attorneys prosecute crimes; others defend the accused. Some lawyers specialize in civil cases such as divorces. And some, including Rutland Soulen, help people who don't have a lot of money.

Rutland Soulen does not make as much money as other lawyers do — she is paid through donations to Just Neighbors — but she says she loves her job. Besides helping others, she likes that her three children, the oldest of whom is 12, can sometimes come to work with her.

After law school, Rutland Soulen clerked in Con-

necticut for a federal judge (that's a job like being the principal's helper) and then worked at Neighborhood Legal Services in Southeast Washington. She helped low-income people with their legal problems.

She learned a lot about immigration law and continues to stay informed because the rules are always changing. In 1996, she, another lawyer and a pastor started Just Neighbors.

"There is just an overwhelming need for this kind of service," she says.

Some of her clients are unable to read even in their own language, so it's nearly impossible for them to figure out the forms they need to fill out, she says.

The Just Neighbors staff — an executive director, three attorneys and numerous volunteers — has helped people from more than 90 countries. Many are refugees who fled wars, natural disasters or unstable governments. They are hoping to become U.S. citizens and reunite their families.

Children often accompany their parents to Rutland Soulen's office, so she keeps lots of stuffed animals around to give them. The first ones picked are usually those that still have their tags.

"For many of our clients getting something new is very unusual," she says.

Rutland Soulen says that one of the most difficult parts of her job is that she can't help everyone who comes to see her. Some immigrants don't have a legal way to stay in the United States. Before she tells them that, though, Rutland Soulen spends hours reading law books and reviewing other cases, looking for a way to help.

Listening is an important part of being a lawyer, Rutland Soulen says: "For many clients, you are their only ear."

— Amy Orndorff



Just Neighbors keeps a box of stuffed animals for kids who visit the office at an Arlington church.



Allison Rutland Soulen reads many books (this is one of the bigger ones!) about immigration laws. She also educates the community by handing out information about Just Neighbors.

By the Numbers

735,000

The number of working lawyers in the United States in 2004.

\$94,930

The median annual income for lawyers that year. Half made more; half less.

75%

How many attorneys at law work in private practice, either alone or in law firms. Other lawyers work for companies, the government and nonprofit groups.

3

The number of years of law school for full-time students.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Labor, 2004

Security Measures

Rutland Soulen makes sure to shred early drafts of her clients' documents (the final version goes in a permanent file). Shredding a document ensures that no one will find and read her clients' information in the trash.



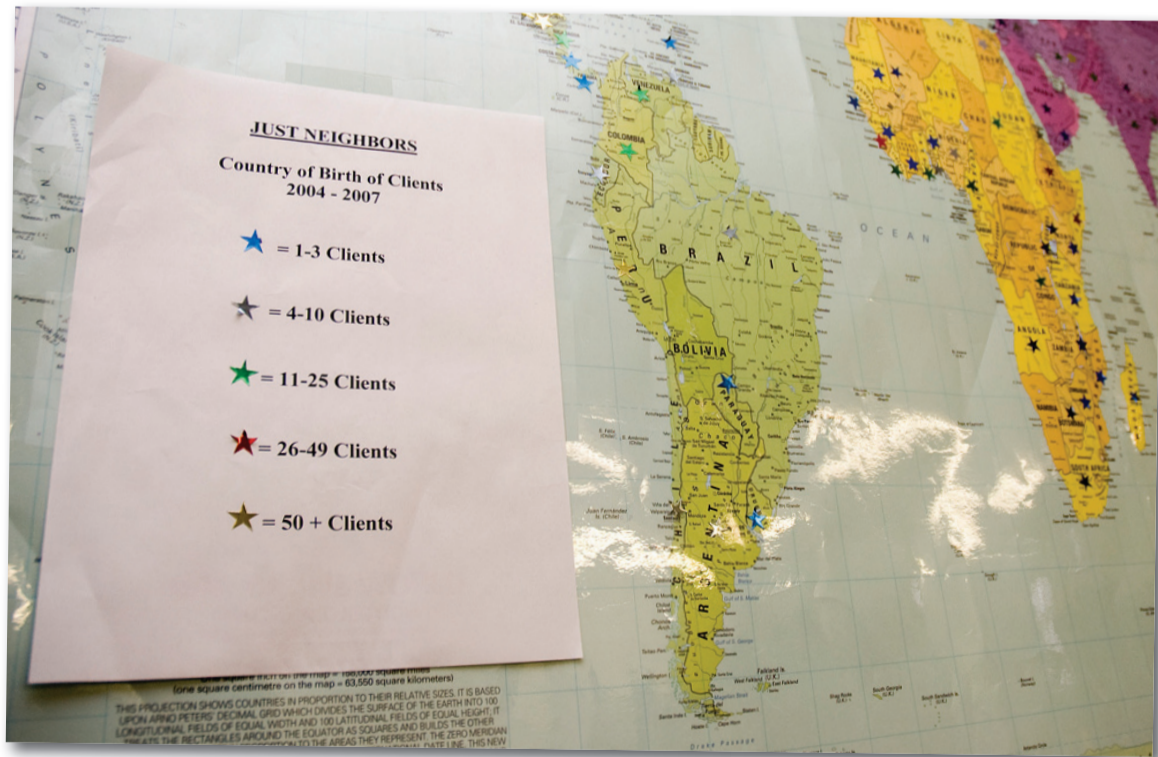
Clients' files



Shredder



A bag of shredded documents



Just Neighbors has helped people from more than 90 countries. Stars on a map show where people have come from.

CAREER TIPS

Before you handle your first case, some tips to get you prepared:

Enjoy Reading

Law students read a lot and never stop learning. Rutland Soulen spends hours each week keeping current on immigration law.

Practice Keeping Secrets

Clients need to trust their lawyers. Attorneys aren't supposed to share what is said in private.

Study, Study, Study

Rutland Soulen works with people from many countries. Knowing their geography and history is important. Because lawyers are needed in every field, anything you develop an interest in could be helpful one day. To become a lawyer, a person must pass a tough test known as the bar exam.

Volunteer

Rutland Soulen enjoys helping people. You can do that now by volunteering in the community.

Be Organized

Lawyers take lots of notes. Just Neighbors handled about 500 cases last year. That's a lot of files to keep track of.

Learn a Foreign Language

Rutland Soulen knows French and is learning Spanish. No matter what kind of lawyer you want to be, she says, knowing another language is a big help.