

TEXAS

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2021

*'Where You
Are and Where
You've Been'*

Texas attorneys share their
stories of coming to America

Former Judge **MARILEA LEWIS**
believes in strength through civility

WARREN HARRIS is on a
mission to teach kids about
Texas' legal system

Legal legend **RICHARD MITHOFF**
has been to the mountaintop

 THOMSON REUTERS

Long before he went to law school, Mazin Sbaiti faced a more difficult challenge: When he was 13, Saddam Hussein invaded his country. "August second, 1990," he says. "I remember that day very well." He and his parents were visiting U.S. colleges with his older sister, so the family never returned to their Kuwaiti home. Instead, they moved into his grandmother's house in Carrollton, Texas, where Sbaiti became a heavy-metal bassist, then joined a debate team, before heading to Columbia Law School.

"I always relate to people who feel like something's happening to them that's completely outside their control," says the Dallas business litigator. "Maybe that's why I do so much plaintiff's work."

We talked with Sbaiti and five other Texas attorneys who immigrated to the U.S. about how they came to live here and how their early experiences prepared them for the law. They arrived from far-flung places—Argentina, South Korea, Albania, Guatemala, Kuwait, India—and for different reasons. Here are their stories.

HOME COUNTRY

Stacey Cho Hernandez,
Carter Arnett;

**Employment and Labor;
Employer; South Korea:**

I was born in the more country part of South Korea, in a city that is now called Iksan. It used to be called Iri.



William D. Wood,
McKool Smith; **Business
Litigation; Guatemala:**

My father was a native Texan. He went to Guatemala and met my mother. He moved down there with a client of his accounting firm, a transportation company. At some point, I thought he was with an agency of the U.S. government. It's my speculation. My mother was a hostess-receptionist at the Hotel Biltmore, which is the fanciest hotel in Guatemala City, and that's how they met.



Olsa Alikaj-Cano, Cano
**Immigration; Immigration
Business; Albania:**

I was born and grew up in Albania, a communist country. Communism meant no communication with the outside world. Nobody could come to Albania and nobody could leave Albania. The government observed everything one did; everything one said. It was very strict. Just



moving to a different city to live, you had to get permission; and while traveling within the country, everyone was subject to being questioned. That was the norm. I remember being happy, because my country is beautiful. I had a nice childhood with my family and friends and teachers, despite the economic poverty then. Our Albanian schools were rigorous and, even though the school system was very different than that in America, when I attended UTEP I had already spoken English for years. ... I give full credit to the schools and teachers in my country for this.

**Sofia Adrogué, Diamond
McCarthy; Business
Litigation; Argentina:**

The 1970s were a time of political turmoil in Argentina. My father was teaching, practicing and leading at a hospital focused on cardiology and pulmonology. His passion was medical research, fulfilled much more readily in the U.S. at the time.



**Mazin Sbaiti, Sbaiti &
Company; Business
Litigation; Kuwait:** My father emigrated to the U.S. from Lebanon in the '60s and was getting his engineering Ph.D. at SMU, where he met my mom. Then he got a job in Kuwait, where I was born. His job there was



working for a nonprofit that would build infrastructure in less well-to-do countries.

Dinesh Singhal,
The Singhal Law Firm;
Business Litigation;

India: I did not plan to come to the U.S. I had political goals—I wanted to run for office in India. I used to jokingly say that I'll be "100% made in India."



Sbaiti: We had a small villa out in the middle of the desert. We literally had to drive in the sand to get to the front gate; at one point, they built a street. We eventually moved closer to the city and lived in a small apartment, and then progressively larger apartments. The last one was near the ocean, so my friends and I would just get up and swim.

COMING TO AMERICA

Wood: My dad, who got homesick when his father passed away, moved us to the United States in December 1966. I must have been 8 years old. I remember going to our first shopping center, and it was just unbelievable. And going to a Dallas Cowboys game. We moved from a tropical climate to a foot of snow in the Panhandle of Texas. I did not know how to speak English. It was a bit of a culture shock.

Singhal: My third year in law school in Delhi, I spoke with one of my mentors. I



Alikaj-Cano at 6 months with her mom in Albania (left); graduation day at the University of Houston Law Center

asked him if it made sense for me to go to the University of New Hampshire Franklin Pierce School of Law [for a course], because the trip and the living expenses would have totally used up my savings. He said, "One: Delhi's so hot in the summer. And, I don't know what will happen—this course is only 45 days—but one trip can change your life." And I took that leap of faith. ... I applied, and they accepted me. After, a family friend in Boston called the school and said, "Dinesh cannot afford the \$6,000 in tuition," and they waived it. It was difficult for students of my age to get a U.S. visa at that time because they knew: This guy's not coming back.

Hernandez: My father's older sister fell in love with an American soldier [who] happened to be from Houston. He left for the end of his service, but he came back for her and went through the long, hard process of getting her here. When we immigrated here, we immigrated through them, as most Asians do—usually they have a family member that immigrates first, and they take it upon themselves to bring the whole family over. My mom and I came over [dad was already in the U.S.] when I was just under 2.

Sbaiti: You lose all your friends, all your stuff. Everything that was normal to you was gone. It was more just, "How do we have a normal life?" and "What are we going to do if we can't go back?" My sister and I went through various cases of withdrawal and mild depression, if not

more than mild. I grew my hair long and tried to learn how to play heavy metal.

Alikaj-Cano: Coming to America, and obtaining the student visa to get here, was not easy in 1997. Just applying to the U.S. Embassy in my country was difficult and expensive. It would have been two or three months of my parents' paychecks combined just to apply for the visa. My parents were very supportive of me coming to the States to study, and so were the people in El Paso, who were very kind and generous. I loved El Paso so much that I invited my sister, who later attended the university as well. She is a U.S. citizen now and lives in El Paso with her family. My youngest sister visited the U.S. in 2002 and, after returning home, she later moved to London for her education, and now lives there with her family. My parents immigrated to the U.S. in 2010 after I was able to petition for them. They loved Texas immediately.

Adrogué: I immigrated to the United States at the age of 8 with my father, Dr. Horacio J. Adrogué; my mother, Sara Oyenard Adrogué; and my four siblings. [We] arrived in Boston at Logan Airport with 14 suitcases, speaking little to no English. Originally funded by a \$5,000 medical research grant from the World Health Organization [for my dad] to support a family of seven, the initial commitment was for one year. The Adrogués—particularly my parents—upon arrival, fell in love with the land

of opportunity and the potential for the achievement of the American dream.

Hernandez: It was just me and my mom. My mom told me [years later] she was terrified. She'd never really been on an airplane. It's a 14-hour flight to Los Angeles. Then she's got to figure out which planes to catch from Los Angeles to Houston, and just how nerve-wracking that was. She's like, "I came with \$50. Bought you a hot dog."

Wood: It was sad because we were leaving our grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins and best friends. We had a nice life there. We had a beautiful house. We got on the airplane. My mother had dressed all three of the kids in identical pants and white hoodies and we landed in the Hobby airport.

CULTURE SHOCK

Hernandez: My father was a captain of a ship [in South Korea]. He'd often be gone sailing. He couldn't do that in America. You have to start over from everything—culture, language. My aunt was a seamstress, so that's what my father learned to do, and he was saving money to start his own alteration and embroidery shop. My mom had some embroidery skills, which luckily translated here, since Southern people love their monograms on everything! That was difficult for my father. He's used to the vast and open seas; now he's hunched over a sewing machine, doing what's traditionally been work for women.

Adrogué: When I came to this country, my mother did not speak English; her native tongue was Spanish. My father spoke only textbook medical school English. We had to adjust from being in a country where everyone could pronounce your name to being in a country where no one can pronounce your name. In seeking to assimilate, we watched shows like *Sesame Street* and *General Hospital* in order to learn the language and culture of our newly adopted home.

Sbaiti: I had very dark skin. I got the "sand n---" comments. I was an outsider [in Kuwait] for being too American, and I was an outsider here for being too Arab. The group of guys who were into the same

music as me—because I wore the T-shirt and everything—were the people who accepted me. When I got here, I didn't have my drums, but a friend had an extra bass, so I spent all my time learning how to play bass.

Hernandez: I was in ESL until second grade, when the teacher realized, "Wait a minute, you speak perfect English, you don't need to be here." It was me and a bunch of Hispanic kids. I was used to being the only Asian person. So, yeah, I got made fun of. Boys would chase me and push the edges of their eyes up so they looked slanted and say things like "ching-chong," even though I'm not Chinese.

Alikaj-Cano: America, Texas, UTEP were a culture shock initially. At UTEP everyone spoke Spanish, and as a linguist I found it very fascinating. I remember my first days there, when I would go to lunch at the cafeteria and point at the food, because the food was in Spanish and, of course, Mexican food was new to me. Soon enough, I fell in love with the Mexican food, people and language. I'm fluent in Spanish now; I speak it daily with my clients."

Singhal: I had some family on my mother's side in New York. One of my mother's cousins was getting married in Syracuse. I took a bus. I met my cousin's wife's brother, who had a joint-venture company that he had started in Boston. He liked me and said, "Would you like to work with me as a law clerk?" I started struggling with this job, because obviously I'm not exposed to American-style legal-anything. I couldn't even type because we didn't have computers in 1992. In our chambers [in India], there used to be a typist who typed on a manual typewriter, and I used to dictate to him.

THE ROAD TO THE LAW

Sbaiti: In my freshman year of high school, I was playing in so many bands, I actually wouldn't go to school for weeks at a time. I'd sleep in a van and travel to Waco or Austin and try to do shows. I was hanging out with 25-year-olds, and one day, I looked at my bandmates, who were nice guys and very intelligent, but they were also sleeping in vans at 25. I said, "I don't think I want to do this." The [school scheduling] system put me into Intro to Debate. I was this weird guy who had long hair. I think the coach liked the counterculture appearance of it. I was pretty good at standing up and

speaking, because I did [in bands] onstage. She convinced me to go into a debate tournament.

Singhal: I already had a JD. In India, they call it LLD. I applied to law school again, because I met Dean [Richard] Alderman from the University of Houston in some law forum in New York. I had no idea of Houston or Texas. At the same time, I found out California allows foreign lawyers to take the Bar exam. In 1995, after finishing my law school applications for first-year, I also applied to take the Bar exam in California. I had a friend call the California Bar on the day before Thanksgiving; when results came out, he said, "Not on the failing list!" So I'm sitting in first-year law school class, having just passed the hardest Bar exam in the country.

Hernandez: I grew up in my parents' shop, but I can't sew worth a lick. I just loved getting lost in a book. There wasn't a whole lot more you could do in the back of a store after school. In eighth grade, our social-studies class reenacted the famous U.S. Supreme Court case where the Miranda rights came from. I was tasked with representing the government as an attorney. I got a real thrill out of doing that. That was kind of the first "huh."

Sbaiti: I went to a famous debate school, Emory University, and I did debate for a little bit and stopped. All of a sudden, most of the debaters there were just much better than me. When I left Emory, I ended up coaching debate. One night, my best friend—who was working at a hedge fund—and I were drinking. He said, "I work with a lot of lawyers. I think you'd be a good



Singhal as a baby in India, with his mom and dad.



Graduation day for Hernandez at The University of Texas at Dallas; making a presentation on South Korea to her 2nd-grade classroom; with her parents (being held by Dad) and one of her 5 sisters.



lawyer." As a child, my father always told me, "You'd be a good lawyer because you like to split hairs." I never thought I wanted to go into law. I was a philosophy and econ major. My grades in college weren't amazing, but I did pretty well on the LSAT and I applied to law school and got into Columbia.

Wood: My regional mock-trial coach was a young lawyer at Fulbright & Jaworski. He got me an interview. About an hour after I walked out of the door—I was a third-year law student—I got an offer. I hoped that I would work with giants of the industry, and maybe I could make it the first three or four years and they'd kick me out. It turned out that was exactly the right place for me—I stayed for 35 years.

Hernandez: I was one of six kids, and I'm the oldest. All my friends were going to the University of Texas, and it was the best school, so I was going to go. My parents sat me down and said, "We know your dream school is Austin, and you know we support you, but you have to be here; we need you to help with your sisters." That was a challenging moment. Later, for law school, I was trying to go anywhere but Texas. But of course, God had different plans, and I went to SMU, which is a block away from their shop. Come on!

Wood's family celebration to mark his high school graduation.



(Right)—Adrogué, the tallest child at 8, arrives in the U.S. with her siblings and parents. (Left)—The family recreates the photo 40 years after their arrival.



LESSONS FROM THE JOURNEY

Hernandez: It's so sad to see what's going on in the news today. I'm the president of the Dallas Asian American Bar Association. We're working to see if we can set up a hotline here for folks to report anti-Asian hate crimes. They're really under-reported, and that's not surprising to me. If you're an immigrant, you're told to keep your head down and work hard and not really make a fuss.

Sbaiti: My friends and I would ride our bikes [in Kuwait] and we'd literally have to pour out a pound of sand from each shoe. My daughters aren't going to grow up to that, and I'm sad. I can't really relate to their childhood right now. When there are TV programs with their dialects of Arabic, I love listening to it, I love watching it, it just takes me home. Dubai and Abu Dhabi are culturally close to Kuwait, and there is a law show set in Abu Dhabi on Netflix, *Justice*. It's law and language and all the cultural sensitivities. At the beginning of COVID, I found it and binged the heck out of it. I'm so sad they've only done one season.

Alikaj-Cano: 1998 was a tough year for me, being an international student in El Paso and away from my family. The Kosovo War, which lasted for almost two years, began in February of 1998 with the Serbian forces committing genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity against the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. At that time, Kosovar refugees were forced to flee from their homes and lands, and they made it to Albania, where Albanian families opened their doors to our brothers and sisters. Watching all of it on TV—and not being able to communicate with my family because of the war—was difficult. I was saddened, but yet I saw firsthand that my country opened its doors to those in need.

That is why, for me, immigration is about opening doors to the most vulnerable and supporting immigrants fleeing persecution—particularly those who flee during times of war. That part has always been special to me, as an immigrant. Now, I have a chance to help the most vulnerable every day.

Adrogué: My story is a story of intense work, passion and, truly, a little luck. I wholeheartedly believe that the service we render others is the rent we pay for our room on earth. I have sought to return in multiples all the opportunities the United States has provided me—whether through my professional or my community endeavors. As an immigrant from Argentina, I feel an immense obligation to give back. We can make a living or design a life. Thus, walk the talk and *carpe diem*.

Singhal: After seven years, when I came [back to India for the first time], on the railway from Delhi to Gwalior, my hometown, that station had about 25 people with garlands waiting for me. They treated me like a celebrity. I remember one of my uncles asking me, "Dinesh, what do you think of America?" I said to him, "If heaven is anywhere on earth, it's in America." I was still impressionable.

Wood: In 2016, my former law partner, who became a United States federal district judge, asked me to speak at a naturalization ceremony. This was particularly special for me, as I became a naturalized citizen in 1976. I did that [before] 1,500-plus new citizens from all over the world. I was able to tell my story. I don't want to say immigrants are stronger patriots than anyone else, but there's a little extra there that makes you appreciate where you are and where you've been. ^{SL}