

Hearsay

While it may not have seen Trump windfall, PAIR Project has devoted legal friends

As PAIR Project Executive Director **Anita P. Sharma** worked side by side with other attorneys at Logan Airport amid the chaos prompted by President Trump's original travel ban, an OpenBoston representative asked her for her organization's Twitter handle so that PAIR might receive due credit on the social media platform, thereby raising its profile — and perhaps a few dollars.

Sharma sheepishly admitted that the organization wasn't on Twitter, a situation that was quickly remedied at the OpenBoston rep's urging.

With that, Sharma came to wear yet another hat, essentially doubling her duties as PAIR social media manager as the Twitter account (@Pairproject_bos) joined PAIR's Facebook page (facebook.com/pairproject).

Later this year, Sharma also will somehow peel away time to don her event-planner hat, working with a colleague to help plan PAIR Gala 2017, the organization's major annual fundraiser.

Such add-on duties might be daunting even if the demand for Sharma's main area of expertise — advocacy on asylum cases and other matters of immigration law — had not spiked exponentially in recent weeks.

The weekend after Trump's travel ban took effect in late January, the ACLU reported raising more than \$24 million online, a largesse of which an organization like PAIR can only dream.

But Sharma isn't complaining. For one thing, there's no time for that. But she also is grateful for the support PAIR does receive, none the least of which comes from a



roster of hundreds of attorneys willing to make the significant commitment to work pro bono on asylum matters through PAIR, with the support of Sharma or one of its three staff lawyers.

The largest piece of that support network can be found high up in the Prudential Tower at **Ropes & Gray**, where attorneys have assumed, happily, a disproportionate share of the asylum caseload that Sharma and colleague **Seth Purcell** have found suitable to be farmed out. Ropes & Gray currently has more than 90 active asylum cases, while most firms have between two and 10, according to Sharma.

In addition, Ropes & Gray attorneys, again trained by Sharma and Purcell, have recently begun helping PAIR with screening interviews and intake for those seeking asylum, what amounts to emergency triage, given that PAIR's intake waitlist doubled from 25 to 50 in the aftermath of Trump's executive orders.

The firm's efforts, which have included arranging for interpreters and opening its offices for intake clinics, have alleviated a bottleneck in the process, she says. Where last year PAIR took on a little more than 100 asylum cases, with Ropes & Gray's help it is on track to

double that number, as it is averaging 20 new cases a month.

Thus, it was no surprise to find Sharma, Purcell and their colleague, **Elena Noureddine**, in an auditorium in Ropes & Gray's offices on March 10, offering a version of the same "Know Your Rights" presentation they've given over 100 times as an antidote to the community panic prompted by Trump following through on his campaign promise to adopt tougher immigration policies.

PAIR's role as educators as well as advocates does not end there, either. It is the only organization to have negotiated access to the state's three — perhaps soon to be four — immigration detention facilities, where PAIR attorneys provide 20-to-30-minute orientation programs to apprise detainees of their basic legal rights, along with one-on-one consultations.

Nerves are frayed throughout the community PAIR serves, Sharma says, with the sight of an Immigration and Customs Enforcement van enough to send people scurrying from a bus stop or baseless reports of subway raids discouraging the use of public transportation.

Given the pervasiveness of that misinformation and fear, Sharma is particularly gratified this year to

have been able to hire a community engagement manager, courtesy of an emergency grant.

Now, it's a matter of securing enough funding to sustain the staff of seven, including the four attorneys.

"We don't want to go backwards," she says. "Nothing is an add-on. We feel like everything we're doing is something the immigrant community really needs help with."

Central to those efforts is PAIR's army of volunteer attorneys. Sharma stresses that an asylum case won't be the easiest pro bono work to come down the pike, with a typical case requiring between 80 and 150 hours of work.

But it's worth it, says **Jennifer A. Rikoski**, who usually grapples with the tax aspects of mergers and acquisitions but fell in love with PAIR work after advocating for an Iraqi interpreter who had served the U.S. armed forces. She has since represented more than two dozen refugees and asylum-seekers.

Serving PAIR has also offered younger associates the opportunity to take a case and run with it, developing leadership skills along the way, Rikoski says. But even retired partners have found the work hard to quit, she reports.

Sharma also says Ropes & Gray helped PAIR get its foot in the door at Liberty Mutual for what she hopes will be the first of many trainings with in-house counsel.

"That's something we couldn't have done on our own," she says.

Now, if she could only find a pro bono party planner or Twitter guru.

— KRIS OLSON