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# MASSACHUSETTS Lawyers Weekly

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## Mintz lawyer's new book puts 11 faces on America's immigration 'crisis'

By Kris Olsen | November 18, 2021

Throughout his time working at Boston's 1 Financial Center, a 20-something employee of Mintz walked past the lobby's door attendant without giving him a second thought. But one day, he stopped and asked the man to tell him his story.

His jaw dropped as learned that, in his native Senegal, the attendant had been a literature professor who could still effortlessly quote any number of French authors.

What made the Mintz employee pause that day?

He had been inspired by reading an early copy of "Journeys from There to Here," the new book by Mintz member Susan J. Cohen, which was released earlier this month.

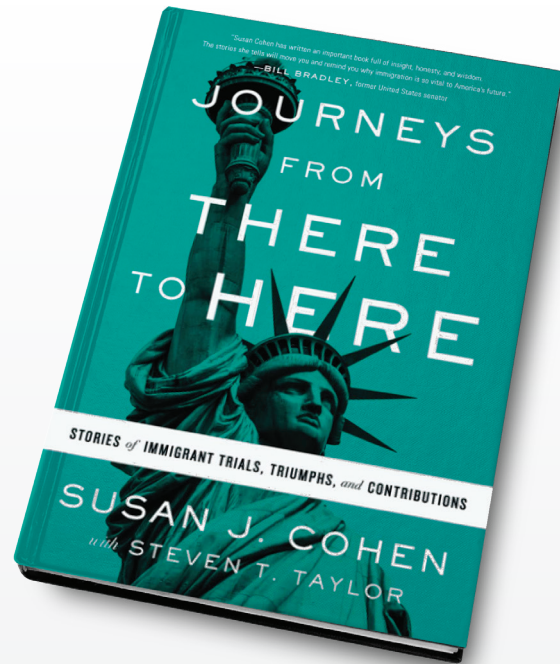
With that, Cohen had her first sign that, just maybe, a primary hope she has for the book might be realized.

The founding chair of the firm's immigration practice says, to be sure, she has thoughts about the flaws in the immigration system and changes that might improve it, which she shares in the book.

"But making people more empathic, helping to move people closer to each other and sharing common humanity is one of my major goals for the book," Cohen says.

What the young man from her office learned about the door attendant is typical, Cohen says.

"People are doing things that are so far removed from what they thought they would do with their lives, but they had to leave [their native countries], sometimes for reasons beyond their control," she says. "They accept that just surviving is good enough, and getting a job that pays a paycheck is good enough."



Cohen's book features the personal stories of 11 of her former clients. One is Audrey, who was abducted in Rwanda, raped, stabbed and nearly killed by Hutu militiamen. Now, she is an American citizen who volunteers to help orphans and at-risk children.

Another is Nasir, who fled death threats from fundamentalist guerillas in the Middle East where he fought for equal rights for girls and women. Today, he is an economist helping Americans recover from natural disasters, climate change and pandemics.

A third is Samuel, a Lost Boy of Sudan, who survived a 1,000-mile journey out of East Africa, only to face a six-year bureaucratic nightmare when he tried to sponsor his wife to join him in the United States.

Cohen embarked on the book project at the height of her exhaustion from responding to the Trump administration's myriad draconian immigration policies.

In early 2017, Cohen helped lead a Mintz team that worked with the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts and others to obtain a temporary restraining order on Trump's travel ban, and the work just kept on coming.

"I was up every night pacing my living room and thinking about what was going to become of all these

immigrants — and not just my clients, but all of them, all over the country and all over the world, who were being prevented from reuniting with their families, who were being prevented from coming, based on applications that had already been approved,” Cohen says.

The book project became an outlet into which Cohen could pour that nervous energy.

Still, it took some convincing from her collaborator, Steven T. Taylor, that Cohen could manage the book project alongside the demands of her professional life.

Cohen had regaled Taylor, an award-winning journalist, with tales of her clients’ bravery while Taylor was conducting a two-part feature interview for the trade publication *Of Counsel*. As they stayed in touch over email, Taylor insisted Cohen needed to author a book.

“I decided if we would write it together, I would write the book because I couldn’t imagine doing it completely by myself,” Cohen says.

Still, Cohen knew that she would need to proceed with extreme care if she were going to delve into confidential details of the stories of her clients, some of whose lives were still in peril.

She and Mintz tapped the Boston law firm of Sennott, Williams & Rogers, which has an expertise in publishing, to conduct arm’s length consultations with the clients to gauge their interest in participating in the book project.

“The bottom line is they all really wanted their stories told,” Cohen says. “They didn’t want to glorify themselves. Most of them just want people to know how much people have to overcome just to get here in the first place.”

To refresh her memory, Cohen fetched the clients’ files out of storage, while Taylor interviewed them. Thus began a protracted, “iterative” writing process that involved not just Cohen and Taylor but the clients themselves.

Six of the clients appear in the book under pseudonyms and five use their real names, but — unless they use Google — readers will not know which is which.

The clients are diverse geographically and with respect to the process they used to enter and remain in the country, be it asylum, family sponsorship, or having extraordinary abilities in their field.

“I wanted to have a representative sampling of the different pathways that our immigration law provides people,” Cohen says.



Susan J.  
Cohen

The book’s opening pages offer praise from an impressive roster of early readers, including former governor and now Mintz colleague William F. Weld, ACLU national legal director David D. Cole, and former New Jersey Sen. Bill Bradley.

But none of the blurbs means more to Cohen than the one from former Supreme Judicial Court Chief Justice Margaret H. Marshall, a South African immigrant herself, who had presented Cohen and her firm with an Adams Pro Bono Publico Award in 2005.

“She doesn’t really do book endorsements, so I didn’t hold out much hope when I asked her,” Cohen says.

Marshall “wanted to know every detail” about how Cohen had obtained the clients’ permission to share their stories and the steps she had taken to protect them. But once she was satisfied, Marshall penned comments that conclude by calling the book “a must read, as important now as ever.”

“I’m this peon in the trenches doing my work, and she’s just my hero,” Cohen says.

Cohen plans to turn any royalty checks she receives over to the Political Asylum/Immigration Representation (PAIR) Project, whose board she chairs. She also plans to hold some book events soon, at least some with her clients by her side, she hopes.