

STILL FIGHTING: Moses Osawe, left, a Nigerian cartoonist who angered the military there, pays attorney Angela Bean with art as she works to secure his U.S. residency.



JASON DOY

Angela Bean: advocate for immigrants in need

Editor's note: This is the last story in a five-part series profiling unsung local pro bono heroes.

By Renee Deger
RECORDER STAFF WRITER

For many foreign nationals facing deportation, Angela Bean is by her own estimation "the lawyer of last resort."

She'll take on the hardest, most complicated and seemingly hopeless case — and slug it out to the end. Colleagues say her compassion and her expertise make her widely known not only among immigration lawyers but also in the legal aid and immigrant communities.

Bean turns people away only when there really is nothing she feels she can do, and she donates about 60 hours a year to straight pro bono cases. For scores of other clients, she works at a reduced rate or ultimately writes off the payment.

The 48-year-old head of Angela M. Bean and Associates, which

PRO BONO PLAYERS

See *PRO BONO* page 9

PRO BONO

Continued from page 1

comprises herself and two associates, thinks the fact that she is often the lawyer of last resort reflects poorly on some of her colleagues.

"It says to me that other people aren't willing to go to bat when there are cases that are winnable, but they're afraid they're going to lose," Bean said.

Bean also described the fear immigration lawyers have when it comes to fighting the government.

"I think a lot of lawyers are afraid to lose because they have to look their client in the eye and tell them they've lost — that people actually have to pack their bags and leave the country and go somewhere where they have no home left or their family has been killed," she said.

She's not immune to such fears herself, but plows ahead anyway, trying to make the best of bad situations that aren't her doing.

"I try to remind myself that the government is putting my client in this position," Bean said. "I can remind myself that I am not responsible for that."

Ask about Bean among Bay Area immigration lawyers, and you'll hear superlatives about her compassion and her lawyering skills. In addition to being a tenacious advocate, colleagues say she's a crack legal mind who relishes a good fight or a seemingly Gordian legal problem.

Donald Ungar, a longtime San Francisco immigration lawyer, said he has a great deal of respect for Bean, and recalls some near-miracles she's performed over the years, including watching legal fees out of the government for one case while stopping a deportation.

"The person had one foot on the airplane, and she was able to get to court and save [him]," Ungar said. "She does a wonderful job."

That case involved a man who had flown into the United States and asked for asylum. That case involved a man who had flown into the United States and asked for asylum so he could join his naturalized wife and infant child.

Bean recalls feeling pessimistic about her chances when she sued the Immigration and Naturalization Service and argued that the agency didn't have a reason to deny the man asylum. Until then, she said, everyone assumed the INS could deny asylum to some people who had not yet taken residence in the United States.

But a court sided with Bean — and also awarded her \$35,000 in attorneys fees. Her client had already paid her some money, but she gave it back.

In 1993, Bean challenged California's policy to deny adoptions if there was unresolved citizenship of any one of the parties involved, the child or a parent. Until then, she said, no one questioned the policy.

"The people who were doing [adoptions] were immigration lawyers like me who didn't know how to sue — and the people who don't usually do immigration are intimidated," Bean said.

But she apparently possessed the perfect mix of skill, guts and righteous indignation



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LAST RESORT: Angela Bean is willing to take on cases that seem hopeless, and colleagues say she relishes the challenge.

to take on the state of California.

Bean's 15-year-old Nicaraguan client had arrived in the United States roughly 12 years earlier, after the death of his mother. He was living with his aunt and uncle, who wanted to adopt the boy.

At the time, Bean wasn't sure of her skills as a litigator and asked a friend at the National Immigration Law Center for advice. The ACLU also pitched in. Bean won what she calls "the fastest lawsuit in the West," racing through it in 30 days.

She said the victory cleared the way not only for her client's adoption but also at least 50 other adoptions that were stalled by the state's policy. A court also gave her attorneys fees, which she split with the agencies that had helped her.

Bean is a frequent speaker at American Immigration Lawyers Association functions, and is a certified immigration specialist and a mentor to young law students. In fact, she said she fields at least one call a day from a lawyer who needs help and found her name on a national list of experts or through a Bay Area pro bono agency.

She is a fierce advocate and extremely knowledgeable about the law," said Minette Kwok, a partner at San Francisco's Mima-mi, Lew & Tamaki.

Adding to her workload is the fact that U.S. immigration officials, as one lawyer put it, are doing their jobs quite effectively now.

Officials are keeping close watch over aliens in the United States, whether they come from a Middle Eastern country or not, and many immigration lawyers are fielding questions from frightened clients about their status. And those lawyers who represent clients from Middle Eastern countries are finding they have to prep their clients in responding in inquiries.

"I don't think immigrants get much re-

spect," Kwok said. "She sees the human being and they have a story and she can articulate these stories."

Bean started out wanting to be a school teacher, like both of her parents, or a psychologist. Instead, the Merced native attended UC-Santa Cruz, discovered she didn't like psychology and ended up earning her bachelor's degree in history and women's studies in 1977.

During her college years, she also got involved in counseling women who were coming out of prison. By helping usher these women from the inside of a jail to the outside world, Bean saw the impact of the law on people's lives.

"Laws change and make people criminals overnight," Bean said.

Bean graduated from Golden Gate University School of Law in 1983. In the years between, Bean traveled to Mexico to learn Spanish since she planned to go into public interest law after law school.

Now, about half her practice is representing people fighting deportation and the other half is helping people with naturalization and other immigration issues. How much of the work is pro bono is difficult to pin down.

One client, for example, paid her \$5 a month for several years to pay a legal bill. Other clients start out by paying a few hundred dollars of a retainer, but run out of money before the case is over. Bean doesn't fire poor clients over unpaid bills if she thinks she can help.

One example is client Moses Osawe, who paid Bean a retainer of a few hundred dollars in 1997 and has since paid Bean with art as she works to secure his residency.

As a cartoonist in Nigeria, Osawe angered the military, then fled the country and came to the United States. He ultimately married, but the marriage ended in divorce. Bean applied for and won his green card under the Violence Against Women Act and she's expecting he will become a permanent resident shortly.

Bean saw the difficulties Osawe faced in getting set up on his own so she asked him to pay her with his paintings. He tried to pay her in cash as well, but she refused.

"I really love what I do," Bean said. "My greatest fear is that I'm not doing a great enough job — and if I feel it can be done, then I need to make sure that happens."

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