

# Public Interest Profile

*Our Series Profiling Counsel Dedicated to Serving the Public Interest*

**Education:** 2012: J.D., Fordham University School of Law, Stein Scholar in Public Interest Law and Ethics, Leitner Scholar in International Human Rights; 2006: B.A., Columbia College, Columbia University.

**Career in Brief:** 2015–present: Safe Passage Project (2019–present: Managing Attorney, Training and Partnerships; 2018–2019: Senior Staff Attorney for Training; 2016–2018: Supervising Attorney; 2015–2016: Staff Attorney); 2014–2015: Masliah & Soloway, PC, Associate; 2012–2014: Start Small Think Big, Legal Services Coordinator.

**Organization Mission and Description:** Safe Passage Project provides high-quality legal representation to young immigrants facing deportation (removal) proceedings. Most of our clients are children who have fled violent or unstable situations in their home countries and arrived in the US as unaccompanied minors. Safe Passage Project’s in-house attorneys and our cohort of almost 500 pro bono attorneys help these young people find safety and stability in the US by assisting with navigating the complex world of immigration law.

No one is guaranteed a free attorney in immigration proceedings, even though the outcomes are quite literally a matter of life and death. Immigration Judge Dana Leigh Marks described immigration court as “death penalty cases in a traffic court setting.” Safe Passage Project and our pro bono attorneys ensure that our clients receive the due process they deserve, and which they might not otherwise get.

**What attracted you to this organization?** I was practicing immigration law in 2014 and 2015 and handling a lot of marriage-based adjustments for the LGBTQI community in the wake of the *Windsor* decision,

which established marriage equality on the federal level. It was a really happy time for so many people because their rights were finally being recognized. At the same time, an increasing number of children and families were fleeing war-like levels of violence in Central America. The situation for unaccompanied minors was becoming increasingly dire, and there were not enough attorneys to represent them. A friend and fellow immigration attorney told me about a position with Safe Passage Project and I decided to shift my focus to removal defense.

Even though it can be a challenge, I love working with young people. In addition, this area of law is intellectually stimulating. Immigration law is complex, and practicing immigration law is a way for me, as a US-based attorney, to integrate concepts of human rights, current events, and history into my work.

**What is your typical day like?** In a typical day, I appear in court in the morning with a client, then return to the office to answer emails and facilitate pro bono placements. I also work on developing training or technical assistance materials

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**ALEXANDRA RIZIO**

MANAGING ATTORNEY, TRAINING AND PARTNERSHIPS  
SAFE PASSAGE PROJECT

(for example, briefs and motions) for our pro bono attorneys and staff.

In the midst of all this, I commute to and from Harlem in New York City with my two-year-old daughter, do daycare drop-off or pickup, and eat all the pretend pizza my daughter “cooks” for me.

**What is unique about working for your organization compared to other employers?**

I have had a variety of roles at Safe Passage Project, starting with Staff Attorney, then progressing to Supervising Attorney, and now Managing Attorney. I am lucky because there is a lot of room for growth at my organization, which itself has grown tremendously over the past five years in response to need. I think the growth trajectory is unique.

The other thing that is unique about Safe Passage Project is how absolutely amazing our staff is. My colleagues are some of the brightest, most compassionate people I have ever had the privilege to work with. Our work can be emotionally taxing, because we are working with trauma survivors within an oppressive system, but the Safe Passage Project staff ensures our clients are at the center of everything we do, and we support each other through this difficult work.

**What do you enjoy most about your role? What are the greatest challenges?** I truly love being on the cutting edge of pro bono practice, as well as developing creative litigation strategies for my clients. We have the opportunity to provide excellent legal representation to young people who are fighting for their lives in one of the most complex, often cruel systems in the country. To stand with my clients during that fight is extremely meaningful.

The greatest challenges are related to the system itself. Immigration law is a behemoth, and it has evolved such that many policy decisions are in the hands of the Executive. Representing children who had been separated from their families (for example, five-year-old children who were desperate to see their parents, who were being detained in another state, and who could not understand what was happening), there are no words to describe that feeling. All we could do was try to figure out what they wanted, and then get that done. At the end of the day, it is that simple — we fight for our clients.

**What special knowledge or skills should an attorney seek to develop in preparing for a non-profit role?**

**What did you learn after you became a non-profit attorney that you wished you had learned sooner?** It is essential to know how to talk to your clients. Be a person and an attorney — the two are not mutually exclusive! Be aware of the power dynamics between attorney and client, and also of the effects of trauma. Give your client space to tell their story, take breaks, and read about how trauma can affect the brain, memory, and processing.

I wish I had learned earlier how to get over my stage fright. When I was a

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new attorney litigating in immigration and family courts, I felt scared all the time. At a certain point, I realized that I was making much ado about nothing, because it is not about me, it is about my client. If I was scared going to court, imagine how my client felt. With this realization, I was able to let go of a lot of my fear. I like to think that I became a much more confident, creative litigator.

**What are some things that have surprised you since becoming involved with your organization?** I am surprised by how much there is to learn, and how much other immigration attorneys are willing to help you figure it out.

**What advice would you give to an attorney considering becoming involved in this type of work?** There is so much need here. Our clients took a dangerous journey because they did not have another option. They did their part, and now they need an attorney to help them navigate the system. Find a mentor, and then dive in and do the work.

**Who or what inspires you?** My clients inspire me. Many of them have experienced truly horrific things, but they are some of the most resilient and resourceful people I have ever met.

These young people — some of them not even teenagers yet — saved their own lives by making their way to this country. It is inspiring to see them survive and thrive.

**Can you describe your organization's pro bono legal program? How can legal volunteers get involved?** I manage Safe Passage Project's robust training and mentorship program. The vast majority of our volunteer attorneys have never worked on an immigration case before. A pro bono attorney is paired with a senior-level attorney at Safe Passage Project, who serves as their dedicated mentor. The mentor will give the pro bono attorney specialized guides, sample forms, and pleadings, and is available to review filings, help develop strategy, troubleshoot, and generally assist. Our pro bono attorneys report feeling supported and empowered to handle a case successfully.

If you have been moved by recent events in the news, representing an unaccompanied minor in immigration proceedings is a very tangible way to get involved. Visit [safepassageproject.org](http://safepassageproject.org) to learn more or volunteer. **PL**