

Helping Immigrants Stay on the Path To Citizenship

By Michelle York

NEGOTIATING THE WAYS of America has never been easy for immigrants. Help was usually only available from lawyers that most could never afford or charities that didn't have enough legal expertise.

That's why three years ago, Allan Wernick, a professor at Baruch College and director of CUNY's Citizenship and Immigration Project, started the University's Immigration Law Certificate Program. "This is a real special thing," said Wernick. "This type of program doesn't exist at any other college in the country."

The program offers graduate-level courses for those who are working with immigrants, or their employers and families. Areas of study include:

- Understanding the laws and regulations governing immigration and citizenship
- Learning to comply with rapidly evolving immigration policies
- Learning how to file petitions and applications
- Understanding business immigration law, naturalization and citizenship

Wernick has been interested in immigration ever since he attended law school in the early 1970s—a time when many students wanted to make a difference in society. He



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—Didier Nzarse

accepted an internship with a California non-profit program, CASA, that helped Mexican immigrants with a variety of issues. "There wasn't a lot of expertise in immigration law," he said of the time.

Immigration law, Wernick knew, was a place he could make a difference.

Over the last three decades, he has worked on programs that make it easier for immigrants to access information about the laws that affect their lives. Besides the Immigration Law Certificate Program, he is most proud of the Citizenship and Immigration Project, which includes nine centers in New York City where immigrants can go for forms, educational activities and confidential consultations with paralegals and attorneys. "It's one of the largest in the nation and it's an inspiration for similar projects around the country," he said.

Wernick also writes a column about immigration issues for the *New York Daily News* and is planning to write a book about the country's immigration debate. (His book *U.S. Immigration and Citizenship: Your Complete Guide* is in its fourth edition.)



Allan Wernick stands amid NYC/CUNY Citizenship Corps trained volunteers, who provide free naturalization application assistance at events held throughout the city.

"There was always a need for more education," Wernick said. "And after September 11th, immigration became a very complicated and difficult area."

Students who participate in the Immigration Law Certificate Program say the most pressing need is to learn how immigrants can become U.S. citizens, Wernick said. They also want to learn more about family immigration — how to avoid having families split across different countries by the nation's immigration policies.

Suri Duitch, University director of adult continuing education and a co-founder of the immigration certificate program, was amazed by the response. "There's been a tremendous amount of interest," she said. "We started with one section and it just grew and grew.

"To our knowledge, there's nothing else like it in the



country," she added. "There are so many immigrant/status issues and there's nothing near like a comprehensive approach as this. It's a tremendous boost to the quality of services."

Dawn Picken, a program development associate for the School of Professional Studies, said 70 people have graduated from the program in its first three years. Hundreds more are enrolled. "Some are from community-based organizations. Some are paralegals and some are lawyers," she said. "But all want more knowledge."

In May, the school graduated Didier Nzarse, who knew firsthand the problems that immigrants face. "I went through the same process," he said. "It was a very personal and emotional experience to be in the classroom hearing the professors."

Nzarse, 43, came to the U.S. from the Ivory Coast in 1993 on a student visa. Now he has obtained permanent residency status and is taking law courses with an eye toward passing the bar exam within the next couple of years. In his spare time, he volunteers at his French-speaking Baptist church, helping other African immigrants with citizenship issues. "If you make a mistake with the IRS, you might have to pay more taxes. But if you make a mistake with Immigration, you can be deported," he said. "It's very, very serious."

He finished the program feeling as though he had found his place in America. "Now I'm more open and more confident," he said. "Now I know a lot more about immigration law, and I know how to help others."