



## Our Immigrant Stories – Marcela Villeda Sanchinelli

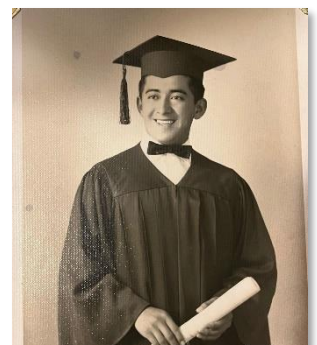
Going through the U.S. immigration process can be an extremely stressful and confusing time. At Grossman Young & Hammond, many of our attorneys, paralegals, and staff are immigrants themselves. Their firsthand experiences with the immigration process allow them not only to help you but empathize with you.

A Guatemalan immigrant herself, Attorney [Marcela Villeda Sanchinelli](#) helps foreign nationals through many of the same immigration processes she experienced. Marcela immigrated to the United States as a beneficiary to her father's L-1A visa. She proceeded to adjust her status to lawful permanent residence in 2014, and recently underwent the naturalization process in 2020. This issue of "Our Immigrant Stories" details Marcela's experiences both as an immigrant and as an immigration attorney.

\*\*\*\*\*

Some might say Marcela was destined to become an attorney. As a child she watched with fascination as her grandfather – a respected attorney in Guatemala – enthusiastically engaged with his clients and shuffled stacks of important papers around his office. Marcela's grandfather was beloved by his clients, known for treating everyone like family. His son, Marcela's father, followed in his footsteps, cutting his teeth as an attorney before moving to the non-profit world. Marcela was determined to forge her own path, carrying her grandfather's empathy and passion for justice with her.

Marcela first came to the United States from Guatemala in 2010 at age 14. She immigrated with her parents and two siblings. Marcela acknowledges that her family's immigration story granted her privileges that many



Marcela's Grandfather, Juan Pablo Villeda Diaz, at his Law School Graduation

others seeking to come to the United States do not have. Her father worked for an American non-profit organization in Guatemala. When he was promoted to manager, he was required to relocate to the headquarters in Virginia. The organization filed an L-1A Nonimmigrant Visa for her father, and she and her family were derivatives on that application (L-2 Nonimmigrant Status). The L-1A Nonimmigrant classification allows a U.S. employer to transfer an executive or manager from a foreign office to an office in the United States. A benefit of L-1A visas is that they are “dual intent” visas – enabling applicants to maintain their nonimmigrant status while also seeking lawful permanent residence (also known as a green card).

While in L-2 status, Marcela was authorized to work and held various jobs as a cashier and sales associate. After a couple of years in L-1A/L-2 status, Marcela and her family decided to seek their green cards and filed their adjustment of status applications with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Their applications were approved in 2013.



school graduation.

For many years, Marcela held lawful permanent resident (LPR) status. As a green card holder, Marcela attended George Mason University and obtained her Bachelor’s in Sociology. After graduating, she worked as an immigration paralegal for a business immigration firm in Arlington, Virginia, while she pursued her Juris Doctor degree from American University Washington College of Law.

Marcela then initiated her process to become a U.S. citizen (naturalization) once she was eligible. Thanks to her employment, she filed her application on her own. USCIS approved Marcela’s naturalization application, and she was sworn in as a U.S. citizen on February 17, 2020, along individuals from over 100 countries.

Though her grandfather and father were major inspirations, Marcela’s interest in immigration specifically was piqued by her peers in her English as a second language (ESL) classes in high school. As she conversed with her peers, she realized that many of her classmates who immigrated were undocumented and



struggled to find employment, apply to college, and survive in modern America because of their lack of status. “Race and immigration are intertwined in the United States,” she says, referring to the treatment of certain immigrants in the United States, “especially those that enter without permission at the Southern Border.”

Today Marcela works on immigration cases mainly pertaining to humanitarian relief, such as asylum, Temporary Protected Status (“TPS”) applications, humanitarian parole, Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (“DACA”), complex inadmissibility waivers, and challenging persecutory INTERPOL Red Notices.

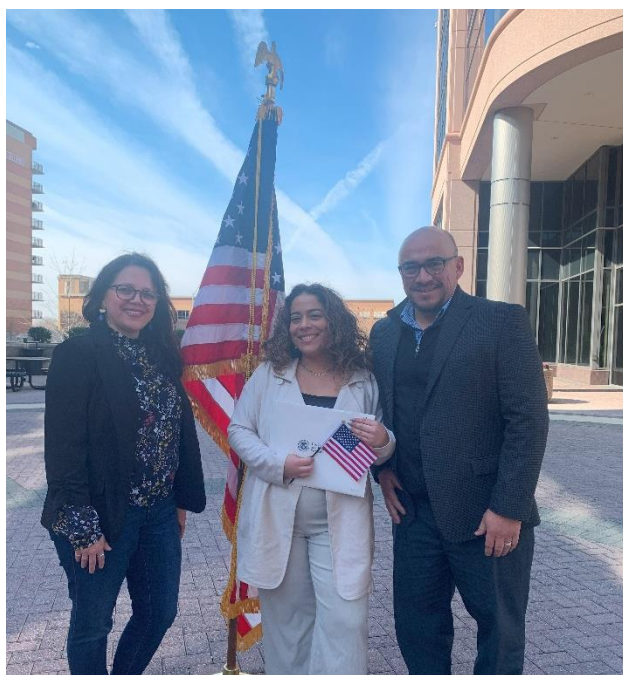
Marcela’s extensive experience with immigration both inside and outside of a legal setting has provided her with a unique perspective on immigration law. Her advice to prospective immigrants is to, “Educate yourself as well as you can about U.S. immigration law, because we do not live in an immigration friendly world. I don’t think a lot of clients realize that when they immigrate into the United States undocumented, they will deal with more than just a language barrier. That can be extremely difficult to overcome, and I think people should be prepared to face that reality.”

Marcela explained that many people she knows and many of her past clients have an idealized version of the “American Dream” when they cross the Southern border. Yet, upon entering the United States and facing U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), including long periods of detention and separation from their families, they learn that their dream is not as attainable as they thought. Marcela believes that American individuals, organizations and media should do a better job portraying the reality of U.S. immigration. At the same time, individuals must understand the sacrifices and hardships they will face should they choose to make the difficult journey across the Southern border.

\*\*\*\*\*

Marcela is most fulfilled by her work with clients. She recalls assisting a man who entered the United States without permission at a young age. He had not seen his family back home in over twenty years. Marcela worked tirelessly to obtain the

required waivers of inadmissibility so that he could go back to his home country, secure an immigrant visa abroad, and re-enter the United States as a green card holder. He was not only reunited with his family after decades of separation – but he was now a lawful permanent resident. As a token of gratitude, the man gifted Marcela with an Our Lady of Guadalupe keychain from his home country, a meaningful relic that sits on her desk to this day.



Marcela and her parents at her oath ceremony. Officially a U.S. citizen!