

# GABRIELLE BUCKLEY

## Embracing the American Heritage of Immigration

by Laura Fletcher

With more than 23,000 members from 90 counties, the American Bar Association's Section of International Law is one of the most influential bodies of its kind. In 2013, Gabrielle M. Buckley of **Vedder Price PC** will take over as the section's chair, bringing a new focus on global migration to the role.

Buckley has already helped implement important reforms to U.S. immigration policy through her work on the ABA's 13-member Commission on Immigration, which makes recommendations to ABA leadership.

Partially as a result of the commission's work, children who have been detained in the United States on immigration charges are no longer placed in general detention centers with

In addition to her broader policy work with the ABA, Buckley has handled high-profile pro bono cases. She is most proud of the work she has done to assist victims protected by the Violence Against Women Act through the National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC), with which Vedder Price has set up a special pro bono program.

"These are women who are victims of horrendous gender persecution, whether it's spouses or family members," says Mary Meg McCarthy, who heads the NIJC. "Their country of origin does not provide protection to them."

Buckley has also helped establish legal asylum for victims of discrimination and for activists who have been threatened by their

"She's a really good woman... She's very understanding of details," says Bior. "When I talked with her six years ago, I could not talk as well as now... The citizenship woman made my interview very difficult. I called Gabrielle Buckley, and she fixed it... She's been very helpful to me."

### Battling a Difficult Culture in Washington

On her desk, Buckley keeps a photograph of Arthur Helton, with whom she co-chaired the Immigration & Naturalization Committee of the ABA's Section of International Law.

He was instrumental in the U.S. government's creation of a "temporary protected status" for visa holders whose home countries experience



adults but are cared for by the Department of Health and Human Services. The ABA has also put together a national network of pro bono legal groups to provide immigrant children and adults with legal counsel.

Currently, there is no right to paid counsel on any immigration matter in the United States.

"We've also been trying to work to develop a more fair and rational comprehensive immigration system," says Buckley, "because right now, it's completely fallen apart."

She points to ever-shifting, complex visa requirements and wait-times for visas as long as 22 years.

governments for speaking out. These cases often take years to complete.

Perhaps her most famous pro bono case was the immigration of Panther Bior, one of the Lost Boys of Sudan. The subject of the Sundance-award winning documentary *God Grew Tired of Us*, Bior was among the 27,000 young boys who fled for their lives when northern Sudanese troops began systematically attacking civilian villages in the south Sudan.

Buckley also helped bring Bior's fiancé, Nyanthiec, one of the few "lost girls," to the United States. She is now arranging the immigration of Nyanthiec's mother.

war or disaster. In 2003, he was killed when terrorists blew up the U.N. headquarters in Iraq while he was meeting with U.N. envoy Sergio Viera deMello to discuss the status of Iraqi refugees.

"His photo is on my desk to remind me what one person can do," Buckley explains.

The principal challenge that Buckley and other immigration attorneys face is the constant change in U.S. policy. "Right now, it's a very difficult culture in Washington... And it's partly related to the recession... Cases that five years ago, I knew would be approved, now I can't be confident of approval."

Part of the problem is that legal decisions regarding a foreign national's visa status are not being made by legal experts but by employees of the Department of Homeland Security. "The people at the top are saying the right things—'Oh we want to encourage business to grow here,' and then the people at the bottom...are making terrible decisions," says Buckley.

Buckley, whose day-to-day practice at Vedder Price involves the legal movement of world class scientists, teams of engineers, famous artists, and multinational corporate executives in and out of the United States, says that many of her corporate clients unjustly face restrictions that cost them money and hurt American business.

Of course, many Americans fear that immigrants take unskilled as well as skilled jobs.

"There's a lot of hypocrisy," says Billy Lawless, who co-chairs the Galway Committee of Chicago Sister Cities, to which Buckley belongs. "We had the same issues with the Irish back in the 1850s... The color of the skin changes every 50 or 100 years."

It's not just the U.S. immigration laws that fluctuate with the political climate. Immigration policies in countries throughout the world change too. Buckley must keep track of all of these to safely place U.S. nationals where their careers require them to be.

"If we're doing our work well, no one's noticing it because everything is just moving smoothly... It's more a matter of making sure everything happened when it was supposed to happen."

One asset that Buckley brings to her clients beyond detailed knowledge of immigration law is a broad background in business.

"What does the client want to accomplish? They'll have an immigration question, and I'll say, well, have you looked at all of these other things that you need to do? Have you protected your intellectual property coming to the country? Have you incorporated to make sure you're protecting the parent company?... You need to really look the big picture."

## From Japan to the World

Buckley always knew she wanted to work in international law.

Growing up in Arlington Heights, the daughter of Justice Robert C. Buckley and teacher Patricia O' Callahan Buckley attended all-women schools and was taught that "the sky was the limit" with regards to her future career. When U.S. President Richard Nixon visited China in her sophomore year of high school, she set her sights on becoming the first woman ambassador to that country.

Unfortunately, Chinese was hard to come by in Arlington Heights, but Japanese was available. The teenaged Buckley spent her nights in

adult education classes and her Saturdays in children's classes at the Buddhist Temple of Chicago. By the time she entered Mundelein College in the late 70s, she was ready to participate in the University of Illinois' first-ever study abroad program in Kobe, central Japan.

"Just sheer luck, it was the right language at the right time," notes Buckley. Japan's importance to the American economy exploded in the 80s. Hokan Seki, the head of Baker & McKenzie's Japan practice, left Baker to form his own firm during Buckley's third year at the DePaul University College of Law. She joined his firm upon her graduation.

Seki, a Japanese-American who spent time in internment camps as a child, was a tremendous mentor to Buckley.

"With Japanese companies, I was always the only woman, and they respect people who are older," explains Buckley. "I was so off the totem pole, ordinarily they would have asked me to get tea. And he was wonderful. He would come in; he would introduce me; he would ask me a question in front of them: 'Gabrielle, what is your opinion on this matter?' So he immediately would demonstrate that he had respect for me, which set the tone for the meeting."

After spending several years under Seki as outside general counsel for companies like Japan Airlines and Mitsubishi Electric, Buckley became in-house counsel for BorgWarner. She lived briefly in Detroit as assistant corporate secretary for Borg-Warner Automotive and had the opportunity to serve as interpreter for Mrs. Honda when the famous Japanese family came to visit.

"Many times, people are surprised someone of her background can speak perfect Japanese," notes Dieter Schmitz of Baker McKenzie, who has worked with Buckley on a number of projects. "She's very good at explaining to clients what the expectations will be culturally... She'll give a welcome in English and Japanese...[and] put the audience at ease."

After spending years doing corporate, anti-trust, and mergers and acquisitions law with a Japanese focus, in 1991 Buckley followed her then-husband to New York in the midst of a recession and couldn't find work in that area. But she had always kept current on immigration law, and she transformed her practice, ultimately doing Japan-related immigration work for Kelly Drye & Warren.

These days, Buckley maintains her second language, but the international flavor of her practice has broadened considerably. "Germans, Brazilians, Swedes, and Russians... Our clients come from all around the world now."

## Paving the Way For Newcomers

"She's probably the top immigration lawyer

that I know," says Mike Burke of Arnall Golden Gregory LLP in Washington, D.C., where he chairs the Section of International Law. The two began the leadership track at the ABA at roughly the same time, and Burke considers Buckley extended family.

Buckley is adamant about making all members feel connected to the ABA. When Argentine lawyer Marcelo Bombau of M. & M. Bomchil Abogados "made his first move" in the International Section, he felt "dizzy. I didn't know where to place myself." He met Buckley at a reception, and she asked him if she could help him get involved.

Recently, Bombau was elected to succeed Buckley as chair of the International Section in 2014. It will be the first time that a non U.S.-licensed attorney has led any section of the ABA.

"She has really mentored me with great interest and with great warmth," says Bombau. "I would never be where I am without her."

When Lawless immigrated to Chicago from Galway on an investment visa in 1999, he also found a friend in Buckley. "She was very highly respected within the immigrant community," says Lawless, who owns the Michigan Avenue restaurants Gage and Henri. Through the sister cities committee, Buckley works on forging business and cultural connections between Galway and Chicago.

She also welcomes visitors to Chicago through her work on the boards of World Chicago, which connects international tourists with local residents, and RefugeeOne, which helps refugees the transition to life in the Chicago area.

"She is one of those dynamic people I know rarely comes up for air," says Virginia Russell, who heads the International Law LLM program at John Marshall Law School, where Buckley teaches.

Buckley, Russell notes, is a working mom—her son, Daire, is a junior at Loyola Academy—and she is close to both her parents.

Bombau recalls answering the phone one day in Buenos Aires to find that Buckley was in town. "I asked her, 'Are you doing business?' and she said, 'No, I'm taking tango lessons.' It speaks of a person who has a lively spirit."

"I would say that I view myself as a Buddhist Catholic," says Buckley, who handled immigration matters for Tenzin Priyadarshi, chaplain at the Dalai Lama Center for Ethics and Transformative Values at MIT.

Through Priyadarshi, she met the Dalai Lama twice. He is convivial and wears a baseball cap, she notes, while the chaplain rollerblades throughout the MIT campus in his saffron robes. The Dalai Lama is also on her wish list for speakers at the ABA Section of International Law Fall Conference in London in 2013. ■