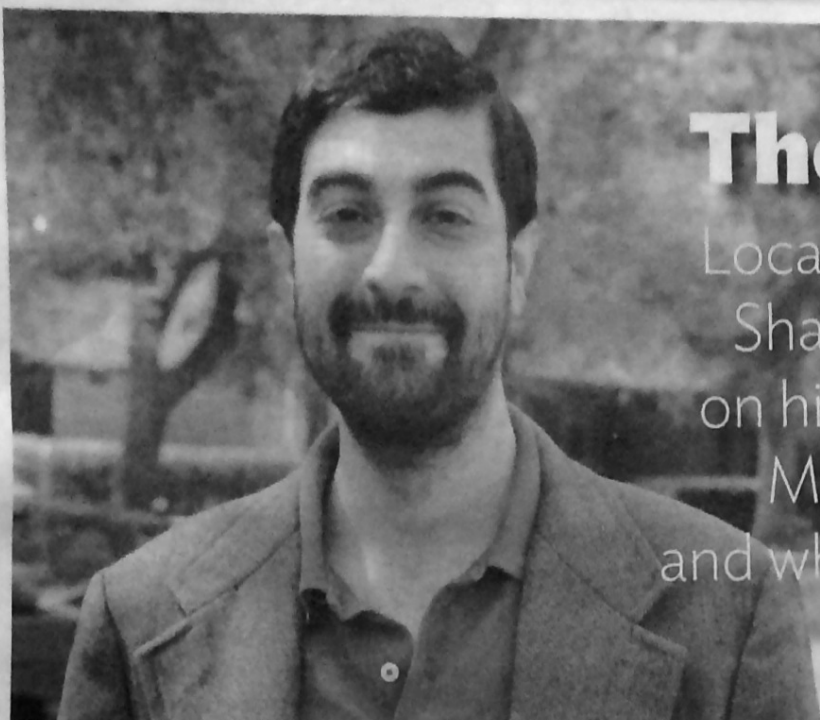




The Dark Horse

Local immigration attorney
Shahid Haque-Hausrath
on his recent LR-121 victory,
Montana progressives
and why he does what he does

By Shane Castle

Helena's Shahid Haque-Hausrath is an immigration attorney who has helped his clients avoid deportation, sued the Montana Highway Patrol for discriminatory practices and now defeated the state in a lawsuit against LR-121, a legislative initiative that sought to deny any and all state benefits to undocumented immigrants, but which Haque-Hausrath argued could only really lead to racial profiling by state employees. The Vigilante recently caught up with Haque-Hausrath a couple hours before he had to catch a plane to Salt Lake City to go defend a client against a pending deportation.

Vigilante: You're pretty young to own your own law firm. How old are you?

Haque-Hausrath: I'm 35 years old and I started the Border Crossing Law Firm in 2008, when I was 29 years old.

Like a lot of people around Montana, you're a transplant. Where'd you grow up?

My dad initially came to the U.S. from Pakistan to be a doctor in underserved rural communities. I was born in Augusta, Georgia. We lived there for a few years before moving to southern Illinois. When I was around seven years old, we moved to southern Indiana.

What about college/law school?

I went to college at the University of Southern Indiana, which is a pretty small school. I studied Business and Sociology as a double major, but wasn't particularly engaged and didn't get very good grades. Somehow, I managed to get into law school anyway, and went to the Chicago-Kent College of Law, which is in downtown Chicago.

For the first time, I found myself actually interested and engaged in what I was learning. I wound up getting straight A's and was ranked first in my class during that first year. I was on the school's law review, which is where I met my wife Katherine. During my last two years in law school, I participated in an externship program with the National Immigrant Justice Center.

They had such a demand for assistance that law students could directly represent asylum seekers with very little oversight. I ended up winning asylum for four refugees over that two-year period. I graduated from law school with high honors in 2005.

What was your first job as an attorney?

Like most law schools, my school had a competitive interview process to work for large firms. I scored a job at Jenner & Block, which is a large law firm in Chicago with more than 400 attorneys. I worked on all sorts of complex litigation, including civil RICO law and defending class action litigation. I also continued by pro bono representation, and won asylum for three more refugees.

That sounds lucrative. Why'd you quit?

I was definitely making the most money I ever will in my career, and it was a good way to pay off student loan debt, but it wasn't what I wanted to do for the long term. My wife, Katherine, had grown up in Boise and had gone to college at the University of Montana. We hatched the idea of moving to Montana, where we could settle down, buy a house, and start a family. It was a big move, but for some reason we were totally confident that it was the right step for us. Turns out that we were right, and we've never looked back. We love it in Helena. We bought a house built in 1874, and we have two kids who were born here — Desmond is three years old, and Coretta is a little over one year old.

What prompted you to start an immigration law firm in Helena?

By that point I had already won asylum for about eight refugees, and I found that work to be really rewarding. All of my clients had extremely compelling reasons to fear returning to their home countries, but it's very difficult to win asylum. Some of those hearings were contentious, and I recognized that I played an important role in making sure that my clients got a fair hearing and that their stories were told. I wanted to continue the work of helping immigrants stay in the U.S. My parents were immigrants, and my own experiences helped me understand the profound impact of immigration on a person's life. I was at a point in my life where I was sick of representing big corporations, and instead of just doing my pro bono asylum cases, I wanted to spend my entire career helping unite families so they can enjoy what our country has to offer. I decided to quit my job and open my own law firm.

In retrospect, that seems like a rather large risk, but at the time I was completely confident that it was the right thing to do, and it really was. I've been doing this for about six years, and I can't imagine doing anything else.

You also started a nonprofit, Montana Immigration Justice Alliance. When was that and why did you think it was important?

I incorporated my non-profit pretty early on, but it really picked up and became more active in 2011. I

recognized that we live in a state with pretty broad anti-immigrant sentiment, and I can't change things over the long term through direct legal representation of immigrants. I started testifying against anti-immigrant bills in the 2009 legislative session and have continued that work. I also recognized that until we can break through false myths and misinformation, we can never really make progress on this issue. I started presenting at libraries and other locations around the state to try and educate the public about how our immigration system really works. But most importantly, I recognized that immigrants in the state are very isolated, and one of the major goals of MIJA is to provide direct services to immigrant communities to empower them.

Over the years, I came into contact with other like-minded people who were working on immigrant rights issues, and they ultimately became the board members of MIJA. We are still an all-volunteer organization, which means no one (myself included) gets paid a salary for our work. But we've been lucky to get funding to be able to pursue our goals, which includes litigation when it is necessary to advocate for our communities.

Speaking of litigation.... You fight and prevent deportations, you've sued Montana Highway Patrol for allegedly profiling suspected immigrants, and you recently sued the state to stop immigration initiative LR-121—which 80 percent of Montana voters supported—so I'm thinking there are probably some people out there who are thinking, "Who the hell does this guy think he is?" So tell us what you're about.

I view my role as advocating for a pretty marginalized and disenfranchised group of people. Immigrants living in Montana are readily identifiable in a state where they stand out—they may look different and sound different—and over the years I've seen a lot of violations of their rights. Most of the time, they don't stand up for their rights, they don't push back, they don't go to court... and what I've chosen to do with my career is pretty much represent that group of people and advocate for them to try to give them some kind of voice. So even though it may seem like there are very few immigrants in the state of Montana and some people might think that I am in the news disproportionately to the amount of immigrants we have in the state, I don't actually view it that way. I think for very right that I am suing to vindicate or for every deportation I am trying to stop, there are so many more people who didn't have access to representation or didn't have an advocate and were wrongly deported or wrongly arrested by the Montana Highway Patrol.

Do you know how many clients you have?

Since moving here, I've come to represent over a