

# The Right to Move

Nonprofit law firm Pangea Legal Services fights deportation on behalf of immigrants by pulling out all the stops — legal defense, legislative advocacy, media campaigning and a fierce work ethic.

By Emily Green  
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Lawyer after lawyer refused to take the case of detained immigrant Jesus Ruiz Diego, telling him he had no hope of avoiding deportation. A prior deportation order, when he was 11, doomed his chances, they said.

Then he met San Francisco attorney Niloufar Khonsari. She told him winning his release would be difficult, but she would try.

"When I first met Nilou, I was like, are you serious?" Ruiz Diego said. "Because she's young. I expected to see an old person with gray hair who has experience."

Khonsari, 30, is a fireball of energy and passion.

Faced with a nearly impossible legal situation, she switched tactics and began a public campaign on Diego's behalf. She held rallies in front of the San Francisco immigration headquarters, began an online petition encouraging supporters to call California's U.S. senators, and reached out to news outlets to cover his story.

From the detention center, Ruiz Diego saw television footage of one of the rallies, with dozens of people he had never met holding signs with his picture that said, "Free Jesus."

Two weeks before Christmas, ICE released him. He has since received legal papers under President Barack Obama's DREAMers program and become an immigrant rights activist.

That is one of many improbable successes by Khonsari and her collaborator in chief, Marie Vincent, since opening the nonprofit Pangea Legal Services a year and a half ago.

Khonsari, an immigrant from Iran, and Vincent, a 28-year-old French native, are wells of passion and idealism. They are undeterred by what more seasoned attorneys say are impossible cases, and they consider social activism and legal representation part and parcel of the same goal.

Their mission is "to stand with im-

migrant communities and migrants who move from one place to another," Khonsari said. The group's name, Pangea, refers to the world when it was one continent and highlights the idea that "as human beings and people we are all interconnected and are one."

If their mission sounds broad, Vincent and a cast of interns, fellows and one other full-time employee are working hard to make it a reality. Pangea has won prestigious grants and the backing of immigrant-rights advocates.

Its focus on deportation defense — and willingness to take on cases at reduced rates or for free — has helped fill a void in the immigration legal community at a time of record deportations. That Pangea offers legal services in seven languages (six of which Khonsari speaks) and everyone who works there speaks Spanish helps.

"Not only are they competent, they practice in a way that I love, which is very respectful of the clients they represent," said Bill Ong Hing, a veteran immigration rights attorney and UC Hastings College of the Law Professor. "It's not a top-down style of lawyering. It's 'let's work on this together.'"

Pangea operates on a mix of money from clients and grant funding. This year, it won \$35,000 from the Silicon Valley Community Foundation to expand its deportation defense work in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, and \$25,000 from the San Francisco Foundation to support Pangea's core operations.

The email from the San Francisco Foundation notifying Pangea it had won the grant sat in Khonsari's spam folder for three weeks before she accidentally stumbled on it while searching for an errant email.

Additionally, the city of San Francisco funds a law student to work at Pangea for six months through its DreamSF Fellowship, and UC Davis School of Law similarly funded one of its graduates to work full time at the organization for six months.



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Marie Vincent, left, and Niloufar Khonsari started Pangea Legal Services together a year and a half ago.

"There is a fearlessness among the leadership here to take on really difficult and hard cases," said UC Berkeley law student and summer law intern Katie Lynn Anderson. "Just because someone doesn't qualify [for legal status] doesn't mean we won't fight for them, or with them."

For Khonsari, the issue is deeply personal. Born in Iran, she and her parents immigrated to Germany as refugees when she was one. She lived there for 10 years before traveling with her mom to Canada, and then the United States, on a tourist visa. They overstayed their visa.

"That was probably the first taste of feeling like somebody could send

me somewhere against my will. And there is fear," Khonsari said, her voice breaking with emotion. "At that time, there was no undocumented and unafraid. There was no DREAMer movement. There was no pride."

Her mom later married an American citizen, and by the time Khonsari graduated from high school she was a citizen. She attended Georgetown University and Georgetown University Law Center.

She always wanted to do international human rights work, but after a year in Sierra Leone on a Fulbright fellowship decided to set roots in San Francisco.

Vincent also aspired to work in

international law, but after interning at major international organizations became disillusioned by their bureaucracy and emphasis on what she described as image over substance.

In 2012, the two lawyers met at an immigration clinic where they were both volunteering. A few months later, Khonsari started Pangea with \$3,000 of her own money. Vincent worked as a part-time contractor until Pangea had enough money to hire her full time.

Earlier this year, they hired their third full-time employee, Alejandra Hilsaca, as the organization's director of operations and legal advocate, and in August plan to bring on a third attorney full time.

Pangea's internal structure matches its outward idealism: It is non-hierarchical. The details of that are being ironed out but it broadly means everyone who works there has a say in how it runs.

"We don't really give orders to each other," Vincent said. "We just ask each other to do things when we need to." Khonsari said the goal is to have all full-time staff paid an equal salary.

For now, Pangea provides a retirement plan for its employees based on socially responsible investing and it is also setting up a monthly stipend for them to spend on preventative health, including gym memberships and meditation.

The emphasis on collaboration comes at the price of dedication and long work hours. Khonsari and Vincent clock between 70 and 80 hours a week. On a recent Monday night, one intern left at 8 p.m. "In terms of responsibility, we are really clear that means everyone owns and shares the organization," Khonsari said.

While Pangea has rocketed to success, its team is in a constant flux of decision making, from determining what types of cases to accept to selecting board members to oversee the organization. Vincent said the hardest aspect of the job has been deciding who to bring on to the Pangea team.

"Learning the law, and applying it and drafting legal arguments is hard sometimes, but I always found I could wrap my head around it and make it work," she said. "But the recruiting, I am still feeling all fuzzy about it. I'm learning it."

She added, "I remember going to interviews and applying for things. And I never thought that so soon I would be the one looking at people's resumes, and calling their references and interviewing them and deciding."

"The thing that is really consistent and really clear," Khonsari said, "is we all embrace the vision that we believe in the fundamental human right to move. And it's a big vision."

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