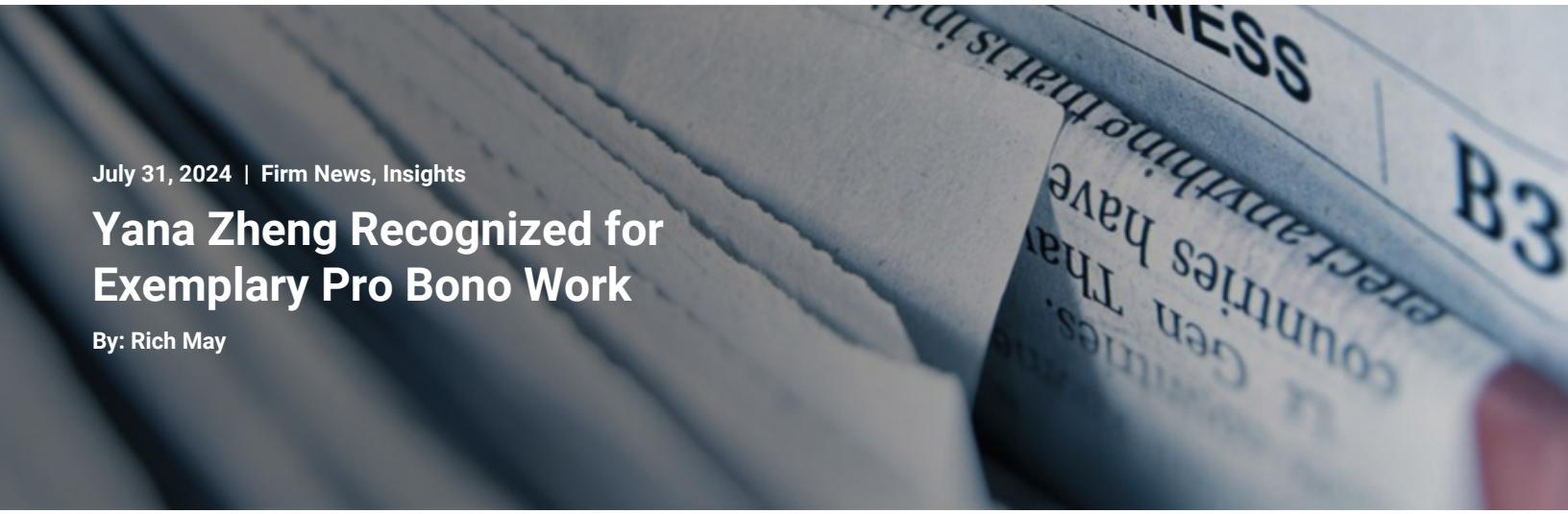

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Yana Zheng Recognized for Exemplary Pro Bono Work

By: Rich May

Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) is the preeminent international nongovernmental organization devoted to the protection of unaccompanied and separated children. Rich May attorney Yana Zheng volunteers her time for KIND, providing pro bono legal services to assist children in need.

This month, KIND recognized Yana in its Pro Bono Attorney spotlight. In its newsletter, KIND wrote: "Yana has worked tirelessly to help her client on his road to permanent residence. Despite some challenges and an uphill battle, she has never stopped fighting for her client. We are truly inspired by Yana's dedication, patience, tenacity, and zealous advocacy for her client, and we are so grateful for her support." KIND also posted its Q&A with Yana, which is reproduced below.

Why did you take a KIND case?

As someone currently undergoing the immigration process, I understand how complicated and sometimes frustrating it can be. When I learned from KIND that these kids, many under 18, and some as young as 10 or 14, are required to appear in court and argue for themselves despite not being fluent in English, I was deeply concerned. Most of these children don't understand the complex immigration process nor do they know the options available to them. Without proper legal representation, these children are at risk of deportation and separation from their families. I believe it is our duty to represent and advocate for their rights, ensuring they receive fair treatment and the opportunity to stay in a safe environment. These cases are exactly what I imagine pro bono work should be—building a just and compassionate legal system and upholding humanitarian values.

What have you learned from this experience or from your client(s)?

From this pro bono case, I learned the critical role of legal work in protecting vulnerable and underrepresented groups; from my client, I learned about resilience, optimism, and the ability to adapt to new environments. My client had to work at a very young age on a construction site and stood up to tremendous threats from gangs. Despite often having

Related Attorneys

Yana Zheng

just one meal a day and wearing thin clothes during the cold days, he still tried his best to support his family, and never lost his dream of becoming a cook or a designer. After coming to the U.S., he had to move several times due to circumstances beyond his control. However, he always managed to adapt to new environments, made new friends, and maintained a positive attitude towards everything. His experience reminded me of the importance of empathy, patience, and how much meaningful change our profession can bring to other people.

What is the most surprising thing you've learned about the U.S. immigration system?

The most surprising thing I've learned about the U.S. immigration system is the lengthy processing time. Many children who qualify for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) and have their petitions approved still have to wait several years before they can get a visa. The delays are primarily due to the per-country and annual caps on visas. In 2023, there are nearly 120,000 youths with approved and pending SIJS petitions from countries including Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Recent data shows that children from these countries have an average wait time of over four years due to a substantial backlog in the SIJS system. This means that even if their SIJS status is confirmed today, they cannot live and work like normal lawful permanent residents until several years later.

Do you have any advice for a new attorney taking their first pro bono case?

I recommend working and communicating closely with their assigned mentors. KIND mentors are very responsive and supportive. Whenever I had questions or issues with my case, I would email my mentor immediately, and he would always get back to me within a day. My case was challenging, with frequent unexpected changes, but my mentor was always there to help me navigate through these complexities and find effective solutions. If anyone encounters any issues in a pro bono case, the first advice is, don't panic and seek assistance from KIND. Another piece of advice is to always keep the client informed. Even when they are children, they can understand complex issues if explained properly, and they usually will become more cooperative if they understand what's going on and the importance, which will make a difficult process much easier.

For more on this topic, please visit KIND's website or feel free to reach out to Attorney Zheng.

Disclaimer: This summary is provided for educational and information purposes only and is not legal advice. Any use of brand names herein, real or fictional, are for educational purposes only. Any specific questions about these topics should be directed to attorney Yana Zheng.

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