

## How A Mayer Brown-Led Coalition Secured 143 Asylum Grants

By **Andrea Keckley**

*Law360 (July 5, 2024, 11:09 AM EDT)* -- A Mayer Brown LLP-led coalition of 20 law firms celebrated a major pro bono victory after recently securing asylum for 143 Asian University for Women students who the firm helped evacuate from Afghanistan in 2021.

It was a high-stakes endeavor, with the team knowing that one failed asylum bid could potentially upend them all.

During the final days of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, as the capital city of Kabul fell into Taliban control, Mayer Brown employment partner Marcia Goodman got an urgent call from one of the firm's former associates, Kamal Ahmad, president of the university. Mayer Brown had worked with the school in the past, and now Ahmad was struggling to get his students through to the Kabul airport. They had been trying to evacuate the young women for six months now, worried as that window began to close that their ties to Western education could put them at risk.

Packed into seven buses, it took three attempts to get them to the airport. Their second attempt failed when a bomb at the airport killed more than 180 people, including 13 members of the U.S. military.

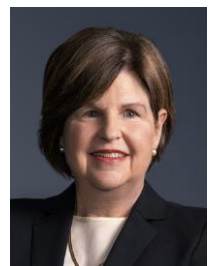
"I mobilized all our partners who had State Department contacts, who had government contacts, who had military contacts and military contractor contacts, who could tell us what was happening on the ground there," Goodman recalled. "It was incredibly touch-and-go."

Pro bono director Marcia Maack called Goodman "integral" to Mayer Brown's efforts to help the students escape.

"[The firm] basically used all of their contacts going up the chain of command in order to get the students into the airport," she told Law360.

The women ultimately spent about 72 hours on those buses before they managed to get on a plane. But even after landing at Fort McCoy in Wisconsin, their safety wasn't fully secure just yet.

As partner Bryan Nese explained in an interview with Law360, many of the asylum claims



Marcia Goodman



Marcia Maack



Bryan Nese



Eftelpe "Effie"  
Xistris

rose and fell together, given their similarities. If they were too similar, a problem with just one application could leave all of them vulnerable.

"I give a lot of credit, credit to [Maack] for making some really tough decisions about how to present these cases in an efficient way — to tell a consistent story among all these asylees, but also not set things up so that the asylum officers could very easily say, 'Well if one case has a problem, let's throw all of them out,'" he said.

To navigate this legal minefield, the coalition tried to identify applicants' social groups with as much specificity as possible.

Nese said the team was "really emphasizing some specific unique aspects of each person's story, so that we had something to fall back on, to say, 'look, it's not just because she's a woman, it's not just because she's a racial minority, it's not just because she's a religious minority. She has ambitions and ties and personal experiences that in and of themselves would be a viable claim for asylum.'"

Asylum and immigration matters are a frequent source of pro bono work for many law firms. A 2022 Index of Pro Bono report by the Thompson Reuters Foundation said that 42% of its survey respondents identified immigration, refugee and asylum services as its focus.

New York-based associate Eftelpe "Effie" Xistris had just started at the firm when the opportunity to help the university students came along. It was her first time working on asylum applications for a pro bono project.

"This has sort of opened up my world," she said. "And I am familiar with a number of New York attorneys who regularly do asylum cases, or, similarly, have done more since being brought onto the AUW team."

The coalition helped evacuate a total of 148 students, aiding 143 of them with their asylum requests. They officially secured asylum for all 143 on March 26.

"I think they are in a much better place now — a lot more peace of mind of their status in the U.S., which I think takes away some anxiety that they may have, having had to go through what they went through," Xistris said. "And they're all definitely excited to have the next step of the green card as well. So it's almost like a middle ground, but certainly, I think a feeling of a little bit of safety now."

The students have since been placed in different U.S. colleges and universities. The adjustment can be daunting, especially after having to leave their families behind when they fled Afghanistan, but both Xistris and Nese say their clients seem to be doing well.

"I know some of my clients from this that I've kept in touch with — they're getting straight As, they're getting involved in student organizations; one of my clients even dyed her hair with purple streaks pretty shortly after she came here," Nese said.

--Additional reporting by Rosie Manins. Editing by Alex Hubbard.