

The widow's defense

An immigration lawyer fights for those left behind.

By Rebecca Koffman

Brent Renison has none of the flash or overweening confidence of a television courtroom lawyer. He is 37, a soft-spoken man with an open, earnest manner. Despite his unassuming demeanor, he has been at the center of two recent high-profile deportation cases in Portland.

At the heart of both cases is a law that denies legal status to immigrants whose U.S. citizen spouses die within two years of the marriage. Renison calls it the "widow penalty" and he has been fighting to change it, in court and in Congress, for the past two years.

Renison is an immigration lawyer and partner at Portland's Tonkon Torp. He has a thriving corporate and individual immigration practice that logs 1,800 billable hours per year. But it is his pro bono work on the widow penalty that is his driving passion. He estimates he spends about 300 of his 400 yearly pro bono hours on widow penalty court work and advocacy. This is a whopping total. The Oregon State Bar Legal Services Department recommends 80 hours of pro bono work yearly.

It started when Carla Mantia, a 22-year-old South African woman, arrived in Chicago in 1999 to work as an au pair. She met and fell in love with Robert Freeman and they married in 2001. Eleven months after their wedding, Robert was killed in a car accident on the way to work.

After her husband's death, Freeman moved to the Pacific Northwest to be closer to his family. In May 2004, Renison says Freeman was asked to report to immigration authorities in Portland, where she was held for seven hours until he secured her supervised release and got a stay on her deportation order until her case could be heard in district court.

Renison had no luck persuading the immigration judge in that court to interpret the law in Freeman's favor. By that

point, Renison says, he had learned of five other widows in similar situations: "I thought, there's something going on here. This is such an inflexible law with such harsh consequences. It seemed like it was ripe for judicial review."

Tonkon Torp, Renison and Freeman have decided to fight the case to the end. Along the way, the widow penalty has garnered national and international press attention and Renison now works pro bono on behalf of 38 widows around the country. Recently he represented Rose-Marie Barbeau-Quinn, the owner of Portland's Vat and Tonsure restaurant and a Canadian national, in an unsuccessful 11th-hour attempt to stave off deportation. She is now in Vancouver, BC.

Renison also has taken the battle beyond the courthouse by spearheading a national campaign to lobby Congress to abolish the widow penalty. The work is emotionally trying. Talking in his office about the photos his clients showed him of their dead husbands, he is visibly moved.

"I've often put myself in the client's shoes, I've looked at all those pictures," he says, his voice faltering. He spins on his chair to look out of the window. After a pause, he says, "Sometimes I have dreams about the people who have passed away. It pains me to think that someone can be left so alone."

"Brent has really made this a crusade," says Marshall Fitz, director of advocacy at the American Immigration Lawyers Association in Washington, D.C. "He's a poster child for legislative advocacy. He's done a great job working both sides of the aisle, both chambers, and getting this fix included in a variety of legislative vehicles."

That fix, drafted by Renison, is included in the McCain-Kennedy immigration reform bill. It would waive the two-year requirement for people who have entered good-faith marriages and whose spouses die before their applications for perma-