

ALUMNI PROFILES

By Alexander Gelfand

From education to crimmigration, litigation to legislation, Maryland Carey Law alumni are applying their skills and sense of purpose to every aspect of immigration law.

Legislator

Hillary Scholten '12

Congresswoman representing Michigan's Third Congressional District



Hillary Scholten '12 was walking out of a town hall meeting in Muskegon, Michigan in February 2023 when her phone blew up: *The New York Times* had just broken a story about migrant children who were working under unsafe and illegal conditions in her hometown of Grand Rapids.

"The very first thing I thought was, 'Someone needs to call their congressperson!'" Scholten recalls.

It took her a moment to remember she *was* that congressperson.

Scholten had won Michigan's Third District just two months earlier, flipping a seat that had been Republican for nearly 50 years and becoming the first woman to represent Western Michigan in the House.

Prior to that, however, Scholten had spent most of her career working on immigration—both as an immigrant rights advocate and as an attorney at the Department of Justice.

As a result, she knew that the fastest way to halt the exploitation of unaccompanied minors was to form an interagency task force between the Department of Labor and the Department of Health and Human Services. So, she called both agencies and the White House, and within a week the task force was up and running.

Few people would have been as well-equipped to address that kind of crisis. But Scholten was practically built for it.

Scholten grew up in a service-oriented household: her mother was a public-school teacher at a high-poverty elementary school, her father a sports reporter who favored underdogs.

“My parents showed me how to uplift people in our community who needed a voice and a champion,” she says.

Inspired by those early role models, Scholten initially pursued a career in social work. Her first job after graduating from college in 2004 was with the AIDS Action Committee in Boston, where she worked as a housing advocate for the LGBTQ community—an experience that helped spark her interest in the law.

“It was so powerful to see what one voice could do on behalf of someone else,” she says.

Her subsequent role as an accredited representative with Catholic Charities in Washington, DC, whetted her appetite further. While individuals in immigration proceedings lack a right to free counsel, non-attorneys affiliated with nonprofits can represent them before the Department of Homeland Security, the immigration courts, and the Bureau of Immigration Appeals (BIA). (The immigration courts operate as administrative courts within the Department of Justice, with the BIA serving as the highest administrative body for immigration law.) Scholten did precisely that before ultimately enrolling at Maryland Carey Law—and continued to do so as a student.

In law school, Scholten joined the Immigration Clinic, then led by Professor Maureen Sweeney. The clinic, which is now part of the Chacón Center for Immigrant Justice, represents low-income immigrants who have fled persecution, been subject to abusive enforcement practices, or currently face deportation due to criminal convictions. Scholten co-authored a journal article with Sweeney, who now directs the Chacón Center, about a 2010 Supreme Court case (*Padilla v. Kentucky*) in which the court ruled that defense attorneys must advise noncitizen clients about the potential immigration consequences of entering a plea. And as both an attorney and a legislator, Scholten continued to share Sweeney’s interest in asylum issues and the repercussions of criminal activity on immigration status.

“She is still, to this day, one of my most impactful mentors,” Scholten says.

Scholten’s dream was to do immigration and civil rights work for the Department of Justice—a dream that came true in 2013 when, after clerking for the special immigration unit of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in New York City, she joined the Justice Department through the Attorney General’s Honors Program. Scholten served as an attorney advisor to the BIA in Washington, DC, working on high-stakes deportation cases— involving questions like, “Is this person going to have to go back? Will they face death?”—and developing a framework for treating victims of domestic abuse and systemic gender-based violence.

“It was incredibly consequential work,” she says. “You’re helping to craft decisions that shape immigration law across the country.”

Dismayed by the administration’s immigration policies, Scholten left the DOJ in 2017 to join the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center, where she helped represent every child that was brought to Michigan under the administration’s family separation policy. Some were just babies.

“That was some of the most harrowing and heartbreaking work that I have ever done,” she says.

Seeing how strongly many Michiganders opposed such policies, Scholten ran for Congress in 2020, lost—and won handily on her second attempt, in 2022.

Since then, she has worked on bipartisan legislation to reform the immigration system and protect unaccompanied migrant children. She has also voted against bills that she feels would undermine the integrity of the system and lead to abuse, whether by disproportionately penalizing immigrants for criminal behavior or facilitating human trafficking.

Going from advocacy to enforcement and back again before finally entering federal politics may seem like an incongruous series of career moves. But for Scholten, every step has been in service of the same goal she continues to work toward today.

“It seemed like one continuous job of working for a just, fair, and humane immigration system,” she says. ■

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Litigator

Adam Crandell '10

Partner, Eldridge Crandell



Adam Crandell '10 came to Maryland Carey Law intending to pursue a career in foreign policy and international relations. But his plans changed after he joined the Immigration Clinic, which was then run by Professor Maureen Sweeney—a clinic now housed in the [Chacón Center for Immigrant Justice](#), which Sweeney directs.

“It was the first time I had any direct client experience, and certainly the first time I’d had any litigation experience: going to court, building a case, making arguments,” Crandell says. “I loved everything about it.”

Crandell loved it so much, in fact, that after spending a summer in the Human Rights Law Division of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement rooting out human rights violators who had come to the U.S. under false pretenses, he participated in the clinic for a second time. On the one hand, he wanted to assist the next batch of clinic students. On the other, he wanted to see some of his own cases through to completion.

“The lifespan of an immigration case is sometimes five, 10, 15 years or longer,” Crandell says. “I have clients that remember my son as a baby—and now he’s a sophomore in high school.”

After graduation—which was unusually exciting, given that his eldest son was born the day Crandell was to be hooded (“we woke up that morning, prepared to go to graduation, and ended up in the delivery room”)—he landed a job at the immigration firm Berlin & Associates working on removal defense, humanitarian asylum, and family-based immigration.

Significantly, Crandell also handled cases that straddled immigration and criminal law. Known as “cimmigration,” the field had recently come to prominence thanks to the 2010 Supreme Court

case *Padilla v. Kentucky*, where the court ruled that defense attorneys were obliged to advise noncitizen clients about the deportation risks involved in entering a guilty plea. After *Padilla*, public defenders' offices had to make sure that they complied with the court's decision, while criminal defense attorneys had to seek out immigration experts for help understanding how convictions might affect their clients' immigration statuses.

By the time Crandell was in his final year at Maryland Carey Law, crimmigration had become a hot topic, and Sweeney had emerged as an early pioneer, helping to establish the school as a leader in the field. (It remains so today: In 2023, the Chacón Center brought on Associate Professor Aadithi Padmanabhan to establish one of the few federal appellate immigration clinics in the country, and, last year, hired Assistant Professor Cori Alonso-Yoder to direct the Immigration Clinic. Sweeney also teaches a new crimmigration law class and co-authored the book *Crimmigration Law in a Nutshell*.)

For a newly minted attorney, navigating uncharted legal waters was exhilarating.

"As a young lawyer, the most fun I had litigating cases was in that area," Crandell recalls. "There was a lot of license to make creative arguments. And as it turns out, some of them have landed: we have really good case law now, particularly in the Fourth Circuit, because of the arguments that myself and Professor Sweeney and others were able to push through."

Crandell went on to build a good portion of his practice around crimmigration—first at Berlin & Associates, then at his own eponymous practice, and eventually at Eldridge Crandell, which he established in 2018 with criminal defense attorney Jeremy Eldridge.

Today, much of Crandell's work involves representing clients who are subject to removal due to criminal convictions, collaborating with Eldridge to undo pleas in which poor advice was given regarding potential immigration consequences, and consulting with other defense attorneys whose noncitizen clients

face criminal charges. (When time allows, he and Eldridge also host a podcast, *Lawyers on the Rocks*, which features them and their guests—attorneys, judges, and elected officials—discussing the law while sipping whiskey.)

Outside of the office, Crandell shares his expertise as widely as possible. In addition to teaching immigration and crimmigration law at Maryland Carey Law and the University of Baltimore School of Law, Crandell has helped train members of the Maryland Office of the Public Defender and participated in panels and training sessions for the National Immigration Project, the Maryland State Bar Association, and the American Immigration Lawyers Association. Since 2022, he has also served as the pro bono legal clinic director for the Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center, a nonprofit that offers immigration services to residents of Maryland's Eastern Shore.

As much as he loves his chosen profession, Crandell admits that working closely with asylum-seekers, detainees, and others who have often suffered gross injustices can take a psychological and emotional toll.

"When you do that, oftentimes you're going to wear some of what they are wearing," he says.

But he draws strength from the immigration team he has built at Eldridge Crandell—a team that now includes partner Rachel Girod, as well as two associates, Lauren Wilhelm '20 and Rachael Savage '22, who also served in the Immigration Clinic.

And even at the most difficult times, the work itself continues to sustain him.

"Sitting down with a client and working on a case really is the best medicine," he says. ■

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Defender

Michelle Mendez '08

Legal Director, National Immigration Project



As legal director at the National Immigration Project—a national membership organization that provides legal and technical support to attorneys across the United States—Michelle Mendez '08 does everything from designing and leading training sessions to conducting federal litigation in defense of noncitizens.

But no matter the task at hand, her mission remains the same: to defend the defenseless, hold the government accountable, and ensure justice for all.

Mendez's commitment took shape early on. Growing up in Virginia, surrounded by Civil War history, she was drawn from childhood to issues of equality, equity, and the misuse of power. The anti-immigrant sentiment that followed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, which occurred while she was studying international relations at the University of Richmond, further deepened her commitment to serving marginalized and at-risk populations.

Mendez got a taste of client-facing work as a legal assistant for the CAIR Coalition (now the Amica Center for Immigrant Rights), a nonprofit that provides free legal services to immigrants who are detained and at risk of deportation. She also explored the policy side of immigration advocacy at the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

By the time she arrived at Maryland Carey Law, her course was set. Even before signing up for the Immigration Clinic, Mendez, who speaks French, reached out to its then-director, Professor Maureen Sweeney, and volunteered to serve as an interpreter for a Cameroonian asylum-

seeker. (Sweeney now directs the Chacón Center for Immigrant Justice.) She also threw herself into international human rights, spending a semester-long externship at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica in her final year.

While in Costa Rica, Mendez won a two-year fellowship administered by Equal Justice Works, an organization that promotes public service careers for law students and legal professionals. The fellowship, which was sponsored by DLA Piper, allowed Mendez to work on behalf of whatever community and cause she chose. After spending a year at Casa de Maryland (now We Are Casa), which provides citizenship and legal services to immigrant communities, she moved to Catholic Charities in Washington, DC. She wound up staying for several years, eventually becoming senior managing attorney in the organization's Immigration Legal Services department.

"It was a great learning experience," says Mendez, who appreciated the autonomy that came with working at a nonprofit. "We didn't have billable hours, and we could really help the people we wanted to help, including detained people and those who needed to appeal their cases."

Mendez often found herself representing unaccompanied minors who were eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), which offers a path to lawful permanent residency for youths under the age of 21. But those cases must initially be brought in state court, and at the time, the Maryland Circuit Courts defined an adult as someone over the age of 18—which meant that Mendez and her colleagues often had to scramble to submit emergency filings before their clients aged out of eligibility under state, if not federal, law.

Mendez therefore spearheaded a successful effort to pass a bill in the Maryland General Assembly in 2014 that redefined the term "child" to mean an unmarried individual under the age of 21 for the purposes of seeking SIJS—a legislative fix that allowed Mendez and her colleagues more time to seek relief for their young clients.

"I was very happy, because so many kids got to stay here with legal status," she says.

Seeking to pass her skills and expertise on to others, Mendez also taught at Yale Law School and Catholic University Columbus School of Law and led the National Institute for Trial Advocacy's immigration programs. In 2015, she became director of the Defending Vulnerable Populations Program to the Catholic Legal Immigration Network (CLINIC), which trains nonprofit immigration legal service providers across the country.

She didn't stop representing clients, however. In addition to suing the Department of Homeland Security, for instance, Mendez led CLINIC's pro bono efforts at the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Texas—the largest family detention center in the United States—where she discovered that many of the women and children who were released nonetheless received in absentia orders for removal. Working with a group of Yale law students, Mendez launched an effort to reopen those orders; and while the process took years, it was ultimately successful.

"We won 100% of those cases," Mendez says.

Mendez has continued to pursue that combination of education and litigation at the National Immigration Project, where her work runs the gamut from working on federal cases to running trial skills workshops and providing technical assistance to other attorneys.

And at the end of the day, nothing makes her happier than hearing from attorneys who have won relief for their clients with her help.

"That's so fulfilling," says Mendez, "because it's a way we can all work together in community to protect a vulnerable population of people—and in turn, protect the democratic principles of this country." ■