

# KC

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**Inside:**

***LEAP Back-to-School Breakfast***

***The Bar Retirement Plan: Getting a Competitive Edge by Tax Favored Benefits***

***Making the Bar Go Round: A Look at Foreign-Born Attorneys in Kansas City***

***Inaugural Kansas City Legal Community Unity Event***



# KCMBA

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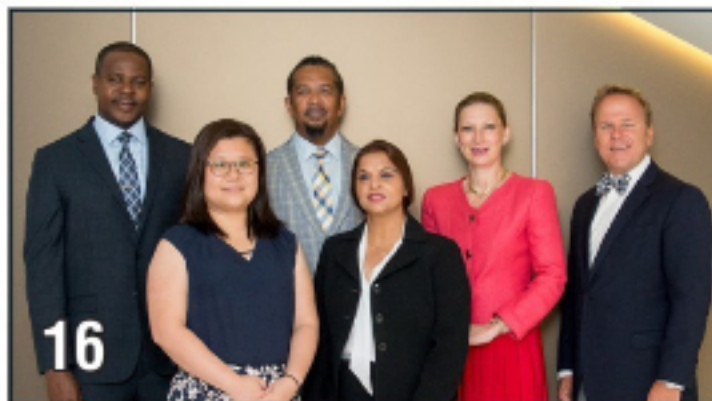
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# contents

September 2018 ■ Volume 27 ■ Issue 8



## Features

LEAP Back-to-School Breakfast.....	8
July Member Social.....	11
Member Appreciation Month.....	11
The Bar Retirement Plan: Getting a Competitive Edge by Tax Favored Benefits.....	13
Making the Bar Go Round: A Look at Foreign-Born Attorneys in Kansas City.....	16
KCMBA's 134th Annual Meeting.....	21
Kansas City Legal Community Unity Event.....	23
14th Annual Heartland Diversity Legal Job Fair.....	25

## Departments

KCMBA President's Message.....	4
Calendar of Events.....	4
KCMBF President's Message.....	6
KCMBA's Affinity Program.....	12
CLE Programs.....	15
Project Pro Bono.....	27
Keeping Up With the Bar.....	28
Classified Advertising.....	28
From the New Crew.....	30

## On the Cover

KCMBA members featured in *Making the Bar Go Round: A look at Foreign-Born Attorneys in Kansas City*. Back row: Leon Versfeld, Marcos Barbosa and Brice Nengsu Kenfack. Front row: Ji Hyun (Jennifer) Kim, Rekha Sharma-Crawford and Mira Mdivani. Photo by Jaylene Gephord for Studio PBJ Photography.

# Making the Bar Go Round: A Look at Foreign-Born Attorneys in Kansas City

By Steve Cosentino

Diversity of membership is one of the great assets of Kansas City Metropolitan Bar Association (KCMBA). KCMBA and the Kansas City legal community offer a welcoming environment to the outstanding foreign-born attorneys who have decided to live and practice in our city. These attorneys offer diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives that benefit all lawyers and the clients we serve. Were it not for these great attorneys, we might be forced to rely on Perry Brandt's world travels to experience other cultures. Fortunately, we can go straight to the source. This edition of the *KC Counselor* focuses on six outstanding lawyers from around the globe. While this is only a small sampling of foreign-born attorneys, they share stories that many find relatable. Despite many inquiries, I was unable to find a local attorney born in Italy. Perhaps this article will inspire me to recruit one.

**Brice Nengsu Kenfack** practices in the areas of product liability, mass torts, pharmaceutical and medical device litigation, and class action and conflicts litigation at Shook, Hardy & Bacon. Brice was born in a small city called Bare in Cameroon, Africa. Although Brice likely exhibited a penchant for legal work at a young age, he came to the United States in September of 2003 on a basketball scholarship. Undoubtedly, Brice is a major asset for the Shook lawyers' league basketball team. Manny Gakou of TD Ameritrade Wealth Management Services said about Brice, "Just make sure to clear your calendar if you are going to argue with Brice about the NBA, especially if LeBron James is involved. That might take a couple of hours." Brice moved to the U.S. to play college basketball and pursue an education at Creighton University where he also attended law school. Brice moved to Kansas City following a federal clerkship in Little Rock, Arkansas. He wanted to be close to Omaha where he played and also to be close to his daughter.

Brice continues to benefit from his childhood in Cameroon. "Having a foreign background allows me to see things from a different perspective, which puts me in a position to more adequately compliment my teams. Also, my foreign background makes it easier for me to adapt to the variety of situations, cases and people (whether it be clients, coworkers, opposing counsel or court personnel) to which/whom I am often exposed," said Brice. His colleagues undoubtedly share that view. Michael Cappo, a fellow associate at Shook, said of Brice, "Brice is a smart, hardworking attorney. He is an essential member of the team and consistently does great work for our clients. Brice is one of the most positive people at the firm. Always smiling, joyful and quick with a laugh. He does a lot for his friends and family here and in Cameroon."

Brice does see cultural differences as a challenge to his practice. "Although I have lived in the U.S. for over 15 years now, I constantly have to adapt to the culture," said Brice. Brice is certainly adapting in his own way and shares his culture with others. "His cookouts are legendary for the spicy Cameroonian seasoning he puts on his kebabs. People line up and wait for them hot off the grill. It's amazing. You should

definitely try to get out there for research purposes," said Mr. Cappo. That zest for both food and life shines through in Brice. "I come from a culture where people manage to keep hope despite having no tangible reasons to believe things will ever get better." That attitude has served Brice well as things are definitely better for him through his practice of law and ability to do great things for his family in Cameroon.

**Rekha Sharma-Crawford** practices immigration law at the firm of Sharma-Crawford Attorneys at Law, LLC. Rekha was born in Shahdol, India and moved to the United States when she was five. She did not complete much education in India, having only attended preschool and kindergarten before she left. Her parents moved to the United States to give her family a better life. Rekha explained, "While my father had an excellent job, the corruption at the time was more than he was willing to expose us to." Like her father, Rekha was willing to move to seek opportunities for herself and her family. "I moved to Wichita in the early 90s to prosecute in the D.A.'s office. We moved to Kansas City after my husband obtained his law degree. We moved because we wanted a bigger city in which to grow as a family," said Rekha.

Rekha's foreign background is particularly helpful in her immigration practice. "As an immigrant, my immigration practice allows me the ability to understand the reality that comes with an immigrant experience. Having to straddle two cultures growing up often creates a sense of belonging to neither. It is a unique experience that many who immigrate feel. It causes people to cling to pieces of both countries' selected traditions in order to sew their own immigration quilt," said Rekha. While Rekha generally has a positive attitude about her experience as a foreign-born lawyer, she did encounter some challenges from both the U.S. and Indian cultures. "To say that I have never experienced prejudice or bias because of my background would not be true. When I first started practicing law, there were not very many Indian attorneys to begin with. Many opted for culturally traditional roles such as doctor or engineer.

This was one of those things that, at the time, isolated me from both cultures. My own Indian culture did not value lawyers in the same way as doctors or engineers, and American society automatically underestimated a foreign woman

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attorney," said Rekha. This has improved for her over the years, but she says, "Some of that has changed, but some still remains."

Rekha has a good sense of wit about her experiences. Lisa Paul said, "Rekha and I met in speech class in the summer of our college days. Rekha wore really high heels that I kept noticing, and when I asked about it, she told me 'What God didn't give (height), I improvised.'" Lisa had glowing comments about Rekha's ability to support others, which undoubtedly translates in her relationships with other local attorneys. "Rekha and I have been friends for over 20 years, and during that time we have had several gap years due to life schedules, but when we reconnected, it was as if time held still, and we carried on with our laughter and silliness that all close friends share. If you have Rekha as a friend, you have someone who will support you in times of need as well as be elated for you in times of joy."

A supportive disposition combined with confident and diligent legal skills make Rekha a formidable force in the courtroom. Tom Ragland, an immigration lawyer at the Washington DC firm of Clark Hill, commented, "As a lawyer, Rekha is a honey badger with a heart of gold. She is tremendously intelligent, creative, and empathetic—and she simply will not rest until justice is achieved."

**Marcos Barbosa** hails from Lisbon, Portugal. He currently practices in the areas of products liability, premises liability, general civil and commercial litigation and toxic tort litigation at Kutak Rock. Marcos moved to the United States in 1992. Although Marcos is not a lawyer in his home country, he did provide an interesting perspective on how that would work in Portugal. Marcos completed high school at Liceu Maria Amelia Vaz De Carvalho High School in Lisbon. He says the civil system in Portugal is different from our common law system. If he wanted to or needed to, he could obtain his license by completing a traineeship lasting 12 to 18 months comprising two stages of training: the first training stage, lasting six months, and the additional training stage, lasting another six to twelve months. He would be required to register with the Bar Association or "Ordem dos Advogados" and sit for a written and oral exam in Portuguese.

Marcos moved to Kansas City to attend MidAmerica Nazarene University in Olathe, Kansas. After undergraduate studies, he attended the University of Kansas School of Law. Marcos clerked and worked for a local litigation firm

for 12 years, joining Kutak Rock in 2016.

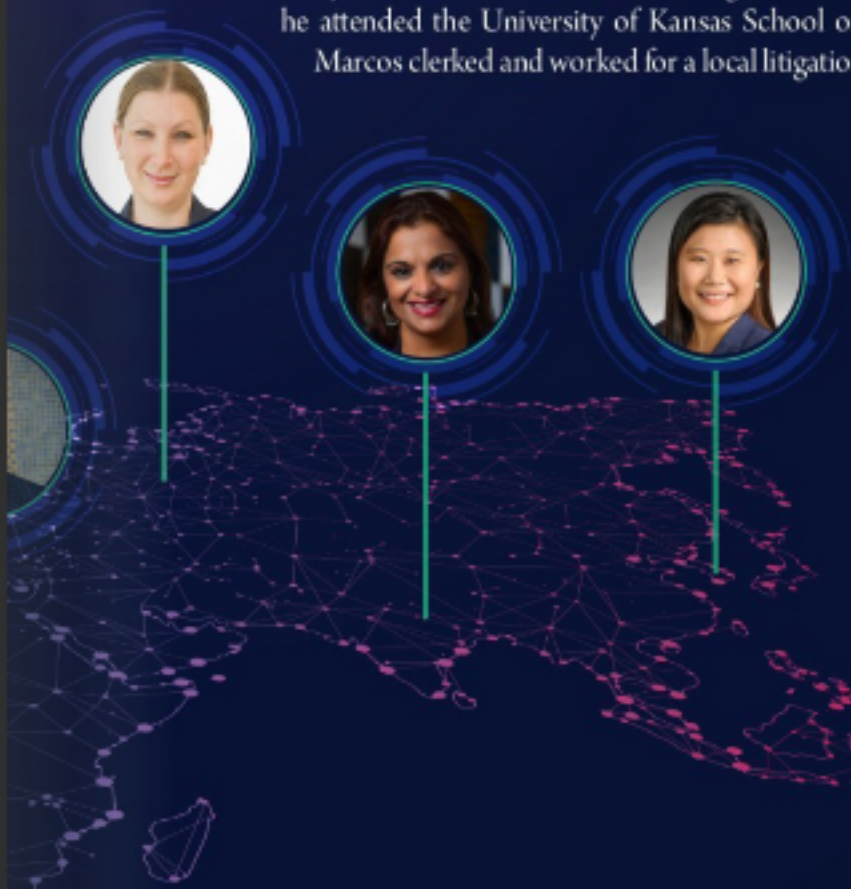
Marcos undoubtedly benefits from his foreign background. "It amplifies and diversifies my perspective, which I believe is critical in the profession of law, particularly litigation. My diverse background enhances my ability to better see and understand my professional world," said Marcos. Marcos is nothing but positive about his experience as a foreign born lawyer. "The challenges I have encountered have little if anything to do with the fact that I'm a foreign-born lawyer. On the contrary, I believe it has opened doors that would or could have otherwise been closed. I also believe that, as the world shrinks, there are other yet unexplored opportunities to be had right here in Kansas City. Our city has always been a welcoming community. With each passing day, it is transforming into this multicultural, multilingual community, while at the same time expanding its direct connections with distant worlds." Marcos strongly supports the expansion of foreign diversity in our local bar. "The need to have attorneys locally that have foreign backgrounds and skills (linguistic, for example) is evermore," said Marcos.

Kori Carew, director of strategic diversity initiatives at Shook, worked alongside Marcos and described him as a walking illustration of cultural fluency and diversity. "Both of us are immigrants to the United States. His father is from Cape Verde where he was born and I am West African. One example of navigating cultural differences was we frequently slipped into animated debates that many Midwesterners would consider 'fighting' that was just normal banter to us. Marcos was able to bring his experiences as an immigrant, multi-lingual attorney to bear in working up cases for clients and being able to bring multiple perspectives," said Kori. She added, "There was an inside joke when a partner mistakenly called him Carlos. With good humor he always answered to Carlos when we called him by that name."

**Ji Hyun (Jennifer) Kim** practices in the corporate finance group at Stinson Leonard Street. She was born in Korea and came to the United States in August of 2002 for the first time to start college in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She attended three years of elementary school, three years of middle school, and a half of her high school term in Korea with some years of elementary school in Bangkok, Thailand and other years of high school in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She studied at the University of Pennsylvania for four years of college and then another year at Columbia University to finish her master's degree. Jennifer went back to Korea where she worked for seven years and then decided to go to law school. In 2014, she began law school at Indiana University. While in law school, she applied for a job through the KCMBA Heartland Diversity Legal Job Fair and landed a job at Stinson. Jennifer enthusiastically said, "This job brought me to this city!"

While working in Korea, Jennifer gained some valuable experience through her job at a company that was part of the global Fortune 500. The company built oil and gas plants and other infrastructure around the world. "The experience helped me get an international practice background which I believe will be an asset to my practice at Stinson. In addition, because I'm bilingual, I can help with any client needing document translation in the Korean language."

Jennifer has an interesting take on her background and culture. "I consider myself a 'third culture kid,' which is a sociological term that describes people



like me who are raised in a different culture from the native country. I was born in Korea but raised in Korea, Thailand, and Bangladesh while I was enrolled in grade school. While I was in those countries, I went to international schools and met people from different parts of the world where I was exposed to many different cultures including the country I was living in at the time. I must say that it played a significant role in my developmental years. I liked new people and learning about new cultures. However, I also envied people who had what they called a 'hometown.' I consider my hometown to be where my parents are at the moment. So when I was looking for a job, I looked for a place where I could settle down and raise a family. I thought Kansas City would be best place to do that. My husband, who lived in a small town in Korea for all of his life and went to college in Seoul, is now here, and we hope to stay here and raise that family."

Jack Bowling, head of the corporate finance group at Stinson, described Jennifer as "a real force—bright, detail oriented, energetic, persistent and conscientious. These traits have led to her getting to work on some of our largest and most complex transactions at an early stage in her career." Stinson litigator Robin Carlson went on to say, "Jennifer is the perfect mix of brilliance and integrity plus charm and humility." As a colleague of Jennifer's at Stinson, I concur with those sentiments.

**Leon Versfeld** is a well-known local attorney practicing immigration law. Leon has been heavily involved with KCMBA over the years. He was born in South Africa and moved to the United States in 2000. Unlike our other interviewees, Leon is a lawyer in his home country in addition to the United States. He finished law school at the University of Pretoria and started practicing in South Africa as an advocate (barrister). Why did Leon move to the United States? The answer to that question is simple. "I found the love of my life—Heather Versfeld (Hunter)," gushed Leon.

Leon notes that his foreign background helps bring in a different perspective on legal issues that are similar in nature but resolve in different ways. The challenges he encountered were that "cultural boundaries are sometimes misunderstood. Building a practice without knowing anyone was also challenging." He never forgets his roots. Leon grew up in the apartheid era in South Africa. "The reconciliation that took place and the transformation of the country and being there to experience it was extraordinary," said Leon.

Last but not least, any article about foreign-born attorneys in KCMBA would not be complete without mentioning **Mira Mdivani**. Mira was born in the former Soviet Union and came to the United States in 1995. She practices immigration law at the law firm she founded and is a fixture at KCMBA and UMKC School of Law-related events. She earned the equivalent of a master's degree before she came to the United States; although, she was not an attorney in her home country.

Mira was undoubtedly inspired by her family. Mira's mother was a lawyer, serving as a prosecutor. Mira explained, "I did everything I could not to go to law school because I wanted to forge my own way in life. But luckily, I eventually realized that law school is the best professional education I can get, so I came to my senses and got my JD." Mira's challenges include her accent. "I have an accent. So I have to try harder. Especially now. That's okay though, since I don't take anything for granted anyway," said Mira.

Mira's arrival in Kansas City was somewhat unplanned. "I was transferred for work. I thought I was going to stay in Kansas City for a little bit only, but then succumbed to its charms—having loved living

in Kansas City ever since." Mira's background of living and travelling abroad make her appreciate the U.S. legal system. "I don't take anything for granted. I have a sense of awe and aspiration for the country that has built a legal system based on due process, lack of corruption, and civil society."

Mira does have an interesting background and culture. Her father comes from Georgia and his father was Georgian and his mother Jewish from Ukraine. Mira's mom is Russian and lived in Georgia and Turkmenistan briefly and then Uzbekistan until she was 12. Mira moved to Moscow where she finished high school and went to college. To quote Mira, "So when people ask me, where are you from? I usually say Brookside. If they don't let me be, I ask them how much time they have—I need about three hours to share about my experiences, places I have lived, music, literature and food that I love. I think the most interesting thing for me is how much I enjoy the opportunity to be an American despite coming from such a different background. I fit right in here. I love the United States for so many reasons, I love the idea that you can build a life based on your hard work and talent and not just based on where you were born. This is a powerful idea making the United States the best country in the world. I am thankful for the freedoms and opportunities this country has afforded me."

Mira's love for our country and our city mirrors that of our other KCMBA foreign-born attorneys. We are privileged to have them serving the legal community and we all benefit from the insights and experiences they share. Those benefits translate to the courtroom as well. Jackson County Circuit Court Judge Margene Burnett, said, "When foreign-born litigants appear in my division with counsel from their own countries or with counsel who easily speak their native language, it is apparent there is an comfort level which enhances the attorney-client relationship due to a respect and understanding of the clients' cultural experiences and expectations." The sentiment expressed by Judge Burnett illustrates how cultural diversity enhances our local bar and KCMBA. Because our clients hail from around the globe, the multicultural perspective these attorneys bring helps us all provide better and more meaningful client service. ■

**Are you a foreign-born KCMBA member?  
Contact us at [info@kcmba.org](mailto:info@kcmba.org) and we will  
feature your story on social media!**



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

*Steve practices technology law, intellectual property, privacy and data security at Stinson Leonard Street where he chairs the IP & Technology Division. He is a third generation Italian American with family from Calabria and Sicily. His parents' generation was forbidden to speak Italian for assimilation purposes. He always lamented the loss of the language to the point that he studied Italian in college. Unfortunately, the dialect proved to be a challenge in speaking with older relatives. He can, at least, order food and wine in Italian.*