FROM THE MEXICAN BORDER TO THE HALLS OF CONGRESS, the controversy over immigration law has intensified and become more critical to U.S. policymakers. Virginia’s Immigration Law Program allows students to explore the key legal and public policy issues affecting this debate, including whom the United States should admit, who should qualify for political asylum, what should be done about the undocumented, and the impact of immigration on the economy or on national security.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCED FACULTY, STUDENTS CONSIDER ISSUES posed by immigration and build practical skills through an immigration clinic and pro bono efforts offering aid to clients. The program also brings in expert speakers on immigration law, including leading attorneys and policy advocates, immigration judges and government officials.

“IMAGINE MY SURPRISE WHEN I WAS HANDED A LARGE FILE ON MY FIRST DAY OF CLASS and was told that my client had six other large files waiting for me in the Immigration Law Clinic director’s office. To say that I was overwhelmed would be an understatement, but alongside feelings of nervousness came a strong sense of responsibility and excitement. By the time I took Elizabeth’s case, at least 10 other students had worked with her. All of those students completed an essential portion of her case, and without them, we could not have obtained the victory we so suddenly did. I began Elizabeth’s case with the expectation that my role would be to write a brief, but a little over a month into the semester, we heard from the Office of Chief Counsel that they no longer opposed Elizabeth’s application for asylum. The government’s non-opposition is a tribute to the quality of the work by all the students — their sensitive handling of the client and persuasive legal briefing. About a week after that great news, we were scheduled to be in court for a hearing, an unusual turn of events. After only about 15 minutes, the judge granted Elizabeth asylum in the United States; the amount of happiness and relief that we all felt is indescribable.

“Working alongside and learning from the clinic’s director has been an enriching experience, and I am extremely appreciative to have had the opportunity to work with Elizabeth and to see her case through to victory. Working on Elizabeth’s case taught me a great deal about asylum and immigration law generally, but most importantly, it gave me the opportunity to learn how to work with a client. The majority of courses offered in law school provide opportunities for students to get into the case law and ‘think like lawyers,’ but hardly any give students perspective on working with actual clients. The law takes on a whole new meaning when you put a face and a backstory to a case name.”

—Lisseth Ochoa-Chavarria ’17

PICTURED: Elizabeth Almendras, a citizen of Bolivia, came to the IMMIGRATION LAW CLINIC in 2010 seeking asylum after fleeing an abusive relationship. LISSETH OCHOA-CHAVARRIA ’17 was the last in a long line of law students who helped see the client’s case through to victory. Ochoa-Chavarria shared her experience.
The attorneys from the Richmond-based law firm Hunton & Williams work pro bono with the assistance of student volunteers to represent indigent clients in the areas of immigration, asylum and family law.

**Migrant Farmworker Project**
Run by the student group the Latin American Law Organization, the Migrant Farmworker Project works with the Legal Aid Justice Center’s Immigrant Advocacy Program to assist an isolated population often in need of legal counsel. The program represents immigrants and farmworkers throughout the state. Although the center handles mostly employment law cases, it also takes housing and discrimination cases. Student members of the Migrant Farmworker Project visit migrant farm labor camps and inform workers about their rights. The project also seeks to increase awareness about the substandard treatment of immigrant workers and conditions in which they live and work in Virginia. Students do not need to speak Spanish to participate.

**Immigrant Jail Outreach Project**
In conjunction with the Capital Area Immigrants’ Rights Coalition, law student volunteers are trained to help CAIR Coalition attorneys in their work at local jails in Virginia housing hundreds of immigrant detainees. Students may assist in know-your-rights presentations, interview detainees to screen for those who may have claims to immigration status, and conduct initial case development with follow-up interviews and legal research. CAIR then attempts to place cases in their pro bono network or refers to outside counsel those with legitimate claims to status who lack the resources to fund their own defense.

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Each fall, students volunteering for the Migrant Farmworker Project check in on 13 farms in the region to ensure seasonal agricultural workers get the pay and fair treatment they are entitled to under the law. The project, which began in the early 1980s, provides students experience in field investigation and immigration law, helps them bone up on their Spanish and counts toward their Pro Bono Challenge hours.