



# LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

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*New Chacón Center for Immigrant Justice expands opportunities for students to prepare for careers in immigration law.*

*By Suzi Morales*



**K**IRIA ABREU Jimenez '21 came to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic as a child. Now a citizen, she says she doesn't take her status lightly, noting that some of her immigrant friends' situations are not as stable, which makes them vulnerable to having their worlds utterly disrupted.

That is why Abreu Jimenez was drawn to a career in immigration

law. "When you see something is unfair, you have to be willing to give it all you have to make it right," she says, "even if it seems impossible." She chose Maryland Carey Law because of the school's Immigration Clinic, a hub for expertise and training in immigration law for the past 20 years.

As a third-year student in the clinic, Abreu Jimenez had the opportunity to represent clients like Dolores (name changed to protect her

identity) who immigrated from Jamaica when she was a child. Dolores served in the U.S. Army for seven years, earning various service awards but also suffering trauma which led to substance abuse and culminated in a criminal conviction. Facing deportation, Dolores turned to the Immigration Clinic for legal help. Abreu Jimenez assisted her with a petition to overturn the conviction and left no stone unturned to ensure the possibility of citizenship (now pending) for the

## Morales: A Land of Opportunity

60-year-old. “My experience with the clinic was like no other,” says Abreu Jimenez, who was awarded the Maryland Carey Law Ward Kershaw Advocacy Award upon her 2021 graduation.

Now, thanks to a \$5 million gift from biotech entrepreneurs Marco and Debbie Chacón, the law school’s renowned immigration program has expanded to become the Chacón Center for Immigrant Justice, offering a dramatic increase in opportunities for students like Abreu Jimenez to gain experience in Immigration Court and in legislative and appellate advocacy.



Marco Chacón

“We are deeply grateful to Marco and Debbie Chacón for their generous and transformative gift,” says Maryland Carey Law Dean Donald Tobin. “The Chacón Center will establish a permanent immigration law center at the law school, ensuring that advocacy by students will continue to make a difference in our immigrant community.”

### Center adds Federal Appellate Clinic

The Chacón gift enables Maryland Carey Law to hire a tenure-track professor who will establish a new Federal Appellate Impact

Litigation Clinic as part of the Chacón Center. Because immigration appeals bypass federal district court and advance directly to federal courts of appeal, students handling Maryland Immigration Court appeals will have the opportunity to argue before the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit.

“It’s exciting for our students to get this kind of opportunity,” says Professor Maureen Sweeney, director of the Immigration Clinic and now of the Chacón Center, adding that Maryland Carey Law is one of just a few law schools in the country offering an appellate clinic. “It’s unusual for students to have the opportunity to work at the federal appellate level, but they’ll be right in there writing briefs, making novel arguments to the court, and in some cases should be able to actually argue the cases at the court in Richmond, Va.”

### Students to have additional experience challenging criminal convictions

Before joining the Immigration Clinic as a staff attorney, now associate director of the Chacón Center Gabriela Kahrl ’08 had been an assistant public defender at the Maryland Office of the Public Defender. Many of her clients there faced deportation for criminal convictions, often for minor offenses.

Maryland Carey Law hired Kahrl for the Immigration Clinic in the midst of a groundswell of interest from students, but her position wasn’t permanent before the Chacón endowment. Now, the center will be able to provide students with further chances to challenge criminal convictions affecting their clients’ immigration status and address the scarcity of Maryland lawyers trained in the legal nuances at the intersection of criminal and immigration law.

“[Students] will have the

opportunity to do post-conviction and coram nobis (a legal challenge to a conviction because of an underlying constitutional or fundamental error) work in the state of Maryland, which is a critical part of providing holistic representation, especially to those who have been affected by racial profiling,” Kahrl says. A petition for coram nobis requests an order to vacate a conviction, for reasons such as ineffective assistance of counsel. While minor convictions may not severely impact the lives of U.S. citizens, Kahrl says they often lead to deportation for immigrants.

### Broad advocacy includes legislative initiatives

Additionally, the center plans to expand its current efforts in the Maryland legislature.

In the 2020-2021 academic year, Sweeney says the Immigration Clinic’s legislative efforts focused on the “technical glitch” that allows Maryland Probation Before Judgment cases to trigger deportation and other consequences, as well as an initiative for public funding for access to counsel in deportation cases. This work relied on temporary funding; the Chacón gift provides sustained support for such projects.

“We are trying to impress upon students to be broad in their advocacy,” says Kahrl, who heads the policy work at the center. “When bad laws are on the books, we must make our voices heard in the General Assembly and persuade our representatives to help.”

### Financial support for students

Another way the Chacón endowment increases opportunities for students is by establishing the Chacón Scholarship, which will enable Maryland Carey Law to recruit the best and brightest students

interested in immigration law. The first Chacón Scholar is Rafael Moreno '24, a member of the fall 2021 entering class.

There is also financial support for spring break service trips to locations including detention centers in remote areas where representation is scarce. Sweeney says she is eager to resume the spring break trips (suspended for COVID) because they offer another avenue for students to experience real-world advocacy even in their first year of law school. "Students have a theoretical interest in the area," she says, "but once they really start talking to clients, that's when it comes alive for them."

### **Holistic approach to immigrant experience**

In addition to curriculum expansion, the inception of the Chacón Center has allowed Kahrl and Sweeney, along with the Chacón family, to consider how to shape overarching attitudes toward immigration in America, which have become central in the heated national dialogue.

"Our country is built on a lot of that ingenuity, that bravery that it takes to come to a new place, learn a new language, or just live in a different culture and work really hard," Kahrl says.

Kahrl's desire to help immigrants was influenced by her mother, who immigrated to the United States from South America. "It's interesting to grow up the child of an immigrant because you feel like you have one foot in your mother's country and in your mother's identity, or your heritage's identity, and then one foot here," Kahrl recalls. "You feel a little bit displaced and like you're not really sure how to be an American or what being an American is."

One aspect of changing the narrative around the immigrant

experience is "helping clients to exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens," says Sweeney, who is looking into developing citizenship workshops.

"One thing I have realized over the last five years, particularly, is that the power of the vote is the only durable protection for immigrants," Sweeney notes. "Until their voice is heard in the same way as anyone else's, they are vulnerable."

### **Student advocacy provides foundation for practice**

Even for students who do not pursue immigration law in their careers, the center will provide a valuable basis for future litigation and other skills.

"Many law students graduate lacking crucial practical skills and good ethical habits," says Michelle Méndez '08, an Immigration Clinic alumna and current director of the Defending Vulnerable Populations Program at the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. in Silver Spring. "I wasn't one of them, thanks to the Immigration Clinic."

In the clinic, Méndez says she learned to break the case down, from asking detailed questions and follow up during the intake interview to dealing with sensitive topics.

"I'm a big believer that the way to learn to be a lawyer is to be a lawyer," says Sweeney.

According to Kahrl, the best part of her job is seeing students take on challenging advocacy projects and learn their capabilities. "They do such remarkable work and come so far in such a short period of time," she says. "They are usually so much more confident at the end of clinic than they were when they started. It's a joy to see."

Now, with the transformative gift from the Chacón family, students will have expanded opportunities

to develop that confidence and get top-level preparation to pursue immigrant justice for generations to come.

"New generations of students, jurists, and advocates will help to restore the promise of 'equal justice for all'," the Chacóns wrote in a joint statement when the center opened last spring, "and encourage the full participation of new immigrants in society who are following in the footsteps of previous waves of immigrants seeking the American dream." ■



**Inaugural Chacón Scholar  
Rafael Moreno '24**

"I am honored to be named the first Chacón Scholar. The funding for the center enables students such as myself to pursue our passion for assisting immigrants facing the complicated legal landscape while working to create a more equitable and just immigration system."