

One arrived in the United States at 3 months old after being orphaned on the streets of Kolkata. Another came at 24 to attend law school for the second time, and two immigrated as children when communist regimes fell in their respective countries. But all have one important thread in common, best captured by estate planning lawyer Savina Keaney: “As an immigrant, you have only yourself to rely on.”

These four St. Louis-based attorneys muscled their way through tough circumstances, language barriers, loneliness, fear, and uncertainty to rise to the tops of their fields. These are their stories.

Origin Stories

Yi Sun, Yi Sun & Associates; Immigration; China: I went to law school in China. When I graduated, studying abroad was popular, but most international students were going abroad for sciences and I didn't think law would get me there. I was interested in Western culture, and through research found out U.S. law schools did programs for international students. I was accepted to Washington University in St. Louis and arrived in August 2001.



Michael Klenov, Korein Tillery; Securities and Antitrust Litigation; Russia: I lived in Russia until I was 10. Those years preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union were politically, economically, and culturally uncertain. After decades of repression, people were trying to figure out how to survive. Entrepreneurial-minded people like my parents looked forward to what the country would look like after the collapse of communism. My parents were always open to the West and realized the strong demand for Western goods: They started a business importing Western products. The legality was uncertain, but I was too young to understand. It was very risky; there were threats of violence, murder, and kidnapping. My parents arranged for armed escorts for my sister and I. But my parents, who were intelligent, hardworking, and young, were afraid and wanted to flee. We left as political refugees in 1993 and settled in St. Louis.



Sun at Ocean University of Qingdao in China (left), and with her husband upon graduating from Washington University School of Law (above).



Keaney with her parents (above), and enjoying New Year's Eve while her mom cuts a traditional Bulgarian cheese pastry called banitsa (right).



Savina N. Keaney, Lowenhaupt & Chasoff; Estate Planning & Probate; Bulgaria: My parents came over in '90, after communism fell, when I was 2. I stayed behind while my parents did the hard work to set us up, and joined when I was 3. In Bulgaria, there was a lot of uncertainty. The currency was vacillating out of control. They had this little kid who they had to provide a future for, and they decided America was the answer. They came with no money, and one suitcase of clothes and belongings.



Joel R. Samuels, Harness IP; Intellectual Property; India: I was born in Kolkata and taken to an orphanage called the International Mission of Hope. I have no idea what came of my parents. I was adopted at 3 months by my Swedish and Swiss-German parents. We first lived in St. Louis; then in Calhoun County, Illinois; and then from fifth grade through high school, Hawaii.



First Impressions

Klenov: I remember driving along the highway from the airport and being dazzled by billboards. I was like, “Holy crap!” It was night, they were lit up, and I was mesmerized. I thought, “This must be that place—Vegas.” Now I look at billboards and think they're the open-air equivalent of junk mail.

Keaney: TV during the daytime was a revelation. This was not something my parents anticipated in Bulgaria, as TV was static until 8 p.m. They did not like it for me. Naturally, it was all I wanted to do.

Sun: My first day of school, all the people I walked by waved to me. I wasn't sure what was going on. There are so many people in China that it's overwhelming. People hustle everywhere; there is no time for hellos to strangers. I soon thought, “How lovely!” I also was immediately shocked that people stood in lines: to get on a bus, or to buy something. It was so organized! In China, everybody rushes. It's absolute chaos. I'll also never forget the first time I saw an American steak bleeding on a plate. I could not believe what I was looking at.

Early Challenges

Keaney: I remember the first time somebody spoke English to me at a supermarket. I froze. It was intimidating to have to be in a new society and interact when you're little. I also remember having a lot less money than my classmates. If I wanted a bike, my dad would go to a secondhand store and find a piece of this bike and a piece of that bike and cobble 'em together.

When you're an immigrant, you don't have a green card and you're not a citizen, so you have only yourself to rely on. It took 10 years to get green cards, so there was this underlying fear that if you get out of line, you will get deported. There was always some Bulgarian kid in the grapevine who did something bad and got sent back.

Klenov: My parents spoke no English. I knew a little bit. We didn't know anything about St. Louis, or know anybody. We were under the misimpression that St. Louis was on the ocean with palm trees. We lived in a tiny one-bedroom apartment initially. The first couple of months were a whirlwind.

My parents decided to buy a house that they couldn't afford, optimistic that they were going to grow into their potential quickly. In Russia, my mom was an electrical engineer and my dad had good business credentials. He thought, "We're gonna make millions of dollars, 'cause that's America." It didn't turn out that way: My mom cleaned houses; my dad cleaned skyscrapers. We overextended ourselves financially and went into bankruptcy. The house had to be sold. My parents got a really bad divorce. My dad gave up on the U.S. after only a few years and moved back to Russia, where he was either killed or committed suicide. We'll never know.

Sun: A few things were very challenging, the first being September 11. I had been here for less than a month. On the way to school that day, I was listening to the radio, something I did to try to improve my English. I heard "plane," but it didn't register. When I got to school, there were no classes—students were watching TV. When I saw the replay, I froze. I was scared, shocked, and very anxious. I started second-guessing my decision to come here and had nightmares about terrorists coming to St. Louis. I couldn't reach my parents for days.

The second challenge was law school, in general: the isolation and the loneliness, as I had nothing else here at the time. It was difficult because China is not common law. The way of teaching is also different. In China, it's about statute—there's right and wrong. Here, after a case discussion and analysis, I asked my professor, "So what's the right answer?" The professor asked me, "What do you think? It depends." I was very confused; to me, there was a right answer and a wrong one, and nothing in between.

Samuels: It's been a journey for me, as it is for a lot of people, to find out who I am. Obviously, I've always been aware that I'm Indian. And I've lived in America my entire conscious life, but I get my fair share of "Son, you're not from around here." And I'm like, "But I actually am!"

I grew up facing many assumptions, as a kid and an adult. I had a friend of mine say, "I need to know how to say 'I don't speak Hindi' in Hindi." I said, "I need to know that, too." I've tried 23andMe and Ancestry.com, but I've actually found out more about myself through the lens of other Indians: They take one look at me and say, "Oh, you're Bengali." When DNA data confirmed it, they were like, "Yeah. We told you. You could have saved your money."

Finding a Foothold

Sun: Passing the bar changed everything. I passed it the first time, while some of my native-speaking classmates had to take it again. I was very proud.



Samuels with his mom, Lucia, visiting the International Mission of Hope Society in Kolkata (left), and with the orphanage's nurses (below). "One of the nurses who took care of me when I was a baby was still there," he says.



Klenov: My mom was working 120 to 140 hours a week, and she recognized quickly that she should be talking to successful people. The people she worked for, those who could afford a housekeeper, were wealthier. From them, she identified the best school, and I was tasked with getting into that school, John Burroughs, in St. Louis. I got just about the 99th percentile on every test, which surprised the school, given that I only recently learned English. Once I got into the school, we finally had an anchor.

Keaney: I grew up in a small town: Carbondale, Illinois. There weren't a whole lot of Bulgarian people there, so forging community took time. But, eventually, there was a small Bulgarian population, and a lot of that was thanks to the building my parents did: They were language professors and helped bring Bulgarian students and academics to Illinois. I think when we finally all felt like we "made it" was after I got a full-tuition scholarship for undergrad. My parents could not afford to send me to college. When I got that scholarship, I felt like I achieved what they brought me here to do.

Maintaining Tradition

Samuels: My parents made a concerted effort to make sure I explored and understood my roots. I went to an Indian summer camp. I went back to the orphanage when I was in high school with an organization called The Ties Program, which organizes group heritage trips for adopted kids. ... One of the nurses who took care of me when I was a baby was still there. I don't know if at that precise moment I was caught up in trying to figure out what it means to be Indian, or coming to terms with the reality that I could have easily been an orphan who grew up in the streets of Kolkata. There are a ton of moments in your life that, when you're living in them, you don't really feel the heft of them until later. All that hit me later.

Keaney: Bulgarian culture is a café culture—a slower pace. Things aren't as life-and-death as here because, historically, the Bulgarian people have been through a lot. They've fought the dominance of other cultures. So, it's important in Bulgaria to preserve your family unit, and we continue to live that today: We exclusively speak Bulgarian at home; we celebrate

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