

Column: Lawyer toils to find lost immigrant children

By [Michael Tsai](#) | November 20, 2018 *Updated November 20, 2018 12:40am*

Editors note: In last week's column, Michael Tsai wrote about the 72-year-old new lawyer, Kay Lorraine, and how she left her home in



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Kay Lorraine:

Hawaii Kai on a quest for justice. The law clerk, 72, went to Texas to help reunite separated immigrant families

What for many would have been a momentous decision requiring weeks, maybe months, of careful deliberation followed by weeks, probably months, of careful planning, for Kay Lorraine instead crystallized in an instant and was executed in less time than it takes to prep and smoke a good Texas brisket.

One evening the 72-year-old law clerk was at home in Hawaii Kai watching a segment on “The Rachel Maddow Show” about the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Support, a nonprofit group that provides legal support to immigrants. A couple of days later, she was flying to San Antonio on a one-way ticket prepared to do anything at all to help reunite immigrant families separated at the southern border of the United States.

Though head-spinning in its quickness, Lorraine’s decision to hit the pause button on her life in Hawaii and head to the Lone Star State was anything but rash, anything but blindly impulsive.

Lorraine, who had left behind careers in film production and nonprofit leadership to earn a law degree at age 70, had long relied on her Jewish faith and the hard lessons of a challenging but triumphant life to make it through the dark periods of her life.

In the aftermath of a protracted legal battle that left her in a state of spiritual despair, Lorraine put her faith in the Jewish concept of “tikkun olam,” “mending the earth,” which holds that every person has an obligation to work toward a better world. She also found new relevance in her own long-held belief that if a person cannot find justice for herself, she should work to find it for others.

And so she contacted RAICES to offer her services, took a leave of absence from her job with Greg Ryan and Associates and headed to Texas to do just that.

Arriving in 104-degree weather, Lorraine set to help wherever she could, from tracking leads across prisons and detention centers to shuttling immigrants to airports and bus stations.

Over a long, overheated summer, Lorraine worked closely with immigrants whose circumstances broke and re-broke her heart.

There was a young man who had followed his mother across the border and was separated from her and put in general population in a medium-security prison. He contracted mumps while he was in there and was put in medical quarantine with no contact with his lawyer.

“He was 18 but he looked 13,” she said. “He was a child. He was lucky he wasn’t killed in there.”

There was also a young woman who fled her gang-infested hometown after her son’s father was gunned down by a gang member who wanted to marry her. She arrived legally seeking asylum, but that didn’t stop authorities from taking her two children. By the time she and Lorraine met, the children had been lost in the system for more than two months.

So-called “Hail Mary” duty was the toughest emotionally. Those were the days when Lorraine would be tasked with making one last, desperate attempt to locate missing immigrant children or parents after at least three previous efforts had failed. Armed with identifying information that was incomplete at best, Lorraine would attempt to work through a hastily arranged, chronically dysfunctional government tracking system that lacked even a central database for separated children and privatized detention centers with no incentive to compromise their lucrative human flow.

“It breaks your heart,” Lorraine said. “I spent whole days trying and never finding a single one. It rips your heart apart because you know they’re out there.”

Lorraine returned to Hawaii after two months, emotionally burned out but also oddly better than when she had left.

“Those two months were healing for me,” she said.

But Lorraine wasn’t done yet. Last month she returned to San Antonio to help with an interfaith effort to collect and distribute food, clothing, hygiene items and other supplies for Honduran migrants headed toward the southern border via Mexico.

“There’s nothing like doing something for someone else to make you feel better,” she said. “Isn’t that selfish?”