

TRII is growing immigration advocacy, and it's powered by Brandeis students

Jonathan Goldman '19 and Victoria St. Jean '19 co-founded The Right to Immigration Institute



Photo/Mike Lovett

Jonathan Goldman and Victoria St. Jean

By **Jarret Bencks**

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When Jonathan Goldman '19 and Victoria St. Jean '19 learned that immigrants in the U.S. who are facing legal issues often go unrepresented in court, they knew they had to take action. But could two college students with no previous legal experience really make an impact?

Turns out, they can.

Goldman and St. Jean have founded **The Right to Immigration Institute** (TRII, which is pronounced "Tree"), which helps immigrants navigate legal issues through consultation, workshops and legal representation. Most importantly, they want to establish relationships and make a positive impact on the lives of their clients.

"Going through the immigration system alone can be terrifying. Having someone who you trust who has the expertise to help can be a lifeline," Goldman said. "It's providing that sense of relief that lets us know we are working towards making a big difference."

TRII is the only organization of its kind in the country with undergraduate students at the helm and providing the aid, and it all started with an immigration and human rights course taught by **Douglas Smith**, a lecturer in the **legal studies program**.

In the course, Goldman and St. Jean learned that representation is essential to the successful outcome of immigration relief cases, yet there is a problem with under-representation in immigration courts. They also learned that you didn't need to be a lawyer to be accredited to provide legal representation for immigration proceedings.

"Professor Smith told us about how there's really nothing stopping students, or anyone, from becoming an accredited representative. This idea really piqued my interest," said St. Jean, a history and politics major from Hudson, New Hampshire.

St. Jean reached out to Smith in the summer of 2016 to see how she could become more involved. St. Jean and Goldman had been friends since their first year at Brandeis. After Goldman took the course the following semester, an idea began to take shape.

"We were sitting together in a sunny corner of the library and just feeding off of each other's energy," Goldman said. "And it has kept going from there."

In November 2016, with Smith's help, Goldman and St. Jean founded TRII as a student club and established it as a nonprofit organization, which quickly grew into an invaluable local resource.

"Our clients are people trying to figure out a system that's totally unfamiliar to them, and sometimes they're going up against experts," St. Jean said. "We want to help level the playing field."

A \$10,000 **Davis Projects for Peace Grant**, won in the spring of 2017, helped them advance their efforts. The grant allowed Goldman and St. Jean to take part in an intensive overview training program, which then allowed them to train others to receive Department of Justice accreditation to provide representation in Department of Homeland Security proceedings.

Within a few months, they developed their own training program, established a website and began making inroads in the Waltham community. In the fall, they started recruiting other Brandeis students to TRII and training them.

"Students here want to make a difference, they are willing to take on extra to help other people," Goldman said.

To connect with the community, St. Jean, Goldman and Smith have gone to numerous local events, worked with Waltham Public Schools and visited with community and church groups.

"There's a huge need. Everyone we met has had an experience or knows someone who needs help," St. Jean said. "We haven't had to do much advertising to find clients."

As the number of TRII volunteers grew, so did their need for space. They settled into their Crescent Street office in January, which they share with **WATCH Community Development Corporation**.

So far, the organization has helped train more than 20 students, worked with dozens of clients and facilitated community workshops to help immigrants through the citizenship application process.

Smith has been there along the way, providing guidance and feedback to the students. He has more than 20 years of experience running legal clinics at universities across the United States, as well as working with refugee centers and clinics in Eastern Europe. Smith sees TRII as a legal laboratory where students get valuable experience, and produce meaningful outcomes. While there are law clinics run by law schools and graduate programs, TRII is unique in that it is almost entirely an undergraduate initiative.

"Being a part of the system is really the only way to fully understand it," Smith said. "Students here have a real commitment to social justice and a maturity level that made me believe they could handle something like this. They're fairly amazing, I would say."

Goldman and St. Jean have also benefited from the support of Brandeis community members. **Chief Diversity Officer Mark Brimhall-Vargas** wrote them a letter of recommendation when they applied for recognition from the Department of Justice. Lucas Malo, director of **community service**, contacted his huge network of resources in Waltham to connect them with the community. Munis Safajou '16, a classmate of St. Jean's in Smith's class, was instrumental in helping found TRII and still sits on the board. A **Heller School** student, YINUO XU, is among the TRII volunteers. Lauren Gearty, a **PhD in history** candidate who is also a lawyer, helps Smith provide oversight.

"I don't think we'd exist without the people we met and the support we've received from Brandeis," Goldman said. "It's been the facilitative force behind our ability to have success."

Goldman and St. Jean are now focused on the future and making their organization last. They want to incorporate their work into curriculum; starting this summer they will be part of the **Justice Brandeis Semester** course, Human Rights Advocacy in the Immigration Process. They also hope TRII can become a national model, and similar organizations, or other TRII chapters, will sprout around the country.

"We want people elsewhere to see this as an awesome idea and run with it," Goldman said.

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