

Living the American Dream, These Partners Have Seen an Ugly Side

BY LEIGH JONES

WHEN Muhammad Faridi arrived in the United States from a tiny village in Pakistan at the age of 12, he could speak only a handful of English words. Today, he is a Big Law partner, an example of the American Dream that he worries is fading.

Faridi, a commercial litigator at New York-based Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler, came to the United States in 1994 from Bharth, a community roughly 15 miles from Kashmir with about 25 families, little electricity and no tele-phones.

“I remember being completely lost,” Faridi said.

But through hard work, Faridi, now 36, found his way, graduating from City University of New York School of Law in 2007 to later become a Patterson Belknap associate in New York who climbed the firm’s ranks to partner—and to take on one of the most emotionally charged freedom of religion cases in recent history.

Faridi, with lead counsel Adeel Mangi, also a litigation partner at Patterson Belknap, earlier this summer in a highly publicized case won a \$3.25 million



Muhammad Faridi



Adeel Mangi

discrimination settlement, pro bono, on behalf of the Islamic Society of Basking Ridge over the construction of a mosque in Bernards Township, New Jersey. The U.S. Department of Justice had filed a separate suit against the township that settled, as well. Faridi and Mangi, also from Pakistan, are now pursuing a similar case in Bayonne, New Jersey. A settlement conference is pending.

For Faridi, the win in *Islamic Society of Basking Ridge v. Township of Bernards* is particularly poignant. Had President Donald Trump’s proposed legislation restricting non-English-speaking immigrants from entering the country been in place at the time Faridi’s family came to this country, they likely would never have made it to New York.

They were seeking medical help for Faridi’s brother, who was suffering from

pulmonary hypertension. Their father had immigrated to the United States about 10 years earlier and worked as a taxi driver, saving money to bring them here. Faridi learned to speak English by watching closed-captioned television, he said. He, too, drove livery cabs to make his way through school.

The emotions the Bernards Township ordeal evoke, however, run deeper than their connection to the politics of the Trump White House. The case revealed Americans at their best and worst, the attorneys said.

“I’m hopeful and cynical at the same time,” Faridi said.

Part of that hope stems from the strong support the Islamic congregation received from other religious and civil rights groups. Dozens of amicus briefs advocating for the plaintiffs’ right to open the mosque came from such groups as the American Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education.

Still, the resistance from some of the township’s residents to the opening of

a mosque and outright bigotry against Muslims were astonishing, Faridi said.

Emails and social media posts of township officials and a township employee's online diary about the case were admitted into the record. In one, an unnamed official is quoted as saying of Muslims, "They are allowed to lie for the sake of their religion." In another, an official attempted to exclude Islamic Society President Mohammad Ali Chaudry from attending a 9/11 memorial service. "Let's work on something to freeze him out or be plain about why he is an unacceptable participant and [fi]nd a real moderate Muslim. There must be one," an email said.

The correspondence, Faridi said, revealed a "complete dislike of others."

"I don't think I ever appreciated how ugly it was, even after 9/11," Faridi said. "At that time, you could perhaps excuse that. But you realize it is much more than that. It makes your blood boil."

Howard Mankoff, a shareholder at Marshall Dennehey Warner Coleman & Goggin who represented Bernards Township, declined to comment for this article.

As part of a small minority (they are of Southeast Asian descent) and as Muslims in Big Law, Faridi and Mangi feel a special sense of accomplishment from the mosque win. Between the two of them, they know of just a few Big Law partners from their home country. One particularly notable Pakistani partner is Abid Qureshi, the Latham & Watkins lawyer nominated by President Barack Obama for a federal judgeship. Not

confirmed, Qureshi would have been the first federal Muslim judge.

As Asian-Americans, Faridi and Mangi are among a demographic that is the fastest-growing minority group in law schools but also has the highest attrition rates and the lowest ratio of partners to associates among all groups in major law firms, according to a 2017 study by Yale Law School and the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association.

As for the number of Muslim lawyers in the United States, that figure is uncertain, but the Pew Research Center estimated last year that Muslims make up about 1 percent of the U.S. population.

That lawyers with backgrounds such as Faridi and Mangi are scarce at the top of Big Law is something that Bukhari Nuriddin understands. He's a Muslim African-American lawyer who graduated from Howard University School of Law in 2008 and now runs his own litigation and transactions firm in Atlanta. Part of the rarity, in addition to bias, Nuriddin said, is due to a mismatch between Big Law objectives and the need to connect with and contribute to one's culture and community.

"The question is whether you can cut through the red tape and develop a practice that really matters, that makes a difference," he said.

In the Bernards Township case, the dispute centered on land use. The town demanded that the mosque provide 107 parking spots, although other places of worship had much lower requirements for parking. The real reason for the discrepancy, the Islamic Society of Basking

Ridge argued, was community animus toward Muslims.

In December, U.S. District Judge Michael Shipp ruled that the town had discriminated against the group through the higher parking spot requirement. The settlement followed in May.

As lead counsel, Mangi said the \$3.25 million settlement engenders optimism, as does Faridi's ascension in the firm and his handling of the matter. Mangi, who has a bachelor's degree in law from the University of Oxford and an LL.M. from Harvard Law School, interviewed Faridi when he came looking for a job back in 2008. Faridi had just completed a clerkship for U.S. District Judge Jack Weinstein in New York's Eastern District.

"He was a superstar from the moment he walked in," said Mangi, 40.

Besides the legal skills set, Faridi was highly personable, Mangi said. "He has an instinctive feel for how to communicate and work with people."

Mangi said he's "so proud" of Faridi's success at the firm. There's also the added bonus of feeling nostalgic when working with his fellow countryman.

"We can have a conversation in Urdu," Mangi said. "We can laugh about little things."

@ Leigh Jones can be reached at ljones@alm.com. Twitter: @LeighJones711