

Classes Aid Men New to the U.S.

Artan Serjanej understands how difficult it can be for new immigrants to navigate the thicket of unfamiliar laws they encounter when they move to America.

Now 43, Serjanej fled the Eastern European country of Albania as a young man, arriving in the United States in 1990. He earned his GED, attended law school and is now an immigration attorney at Tully Rinckey PLLC in Albany. Serjanej is leading a series of workshops to help male immigrants understand laws regarding domestic violence, child abuse and animal abuse. He has already held two workshops, one for male Congolese refugees living in the Capital Region and another for Arabic-speaking Iraqi male refugees, and more are scheduled for later this summer.

The workshops are part of a new program sponsored by the Albany field office of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, which educates immigrants about their legal rights and obligations in the United States. Future workshop topics include how to handle encounters with law enforcement and how to recognize and report discrimination in housing and job hiring. Workshops for women will also be offered; by the end of the summer, the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants will have offered workshops for Burmese, Congolese, Iraqi and Afghan clients of both sexes.

The new program, called Legal Rights and Responsibilities in the United States, began two months ago. The workshops have been organized with help from local community groups, such as the Capital Region chapter of the New York Civil Liberties Union and Equinox Inc. Last month, Melanie Trimble, the executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, and Serjanej conducted basic civil liberties training with the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants staff.

Refugees and immigrants often ask for advice on how to deal with law enforcement, said Una Hardester, outreach coordinator for the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, which aids refugees who are taken in by the United Nations and approved for resettlement by the U.S. by the Department of Homeland Security. "Many of our clients come from countries where they were fleeing from law enforcement," she said. "They need to understand what their rights are in this country. We set people's minds at ease. We tell them that the police can't break into their homes in the middle of the night."

Immigrants often experience discrimination, Hardester said. The workshops will help them recognize discrimination and take action, she said.

"We're trying to educate and empower them," she said. "Many complain that they are turned away for housing and jobs." The workshops on discrimination will involve interactive presentations and role-playing.

In March, the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants moved to a larger office at 991 Broadway, and it can now offer more educational workshops for immigrants and refugees, Hardester said. "Previously we had a very small office," she said. Workshops will be held

throughout the summer.

Serjanej said he draws upon his experience as a refugee when talking to the men in his domestic violence workshops. He said these men are receptive to his message — “They appreciate the fact that someone is showing them the way” — even though his message isn’t always an easy one for people to digest, he said.

“I’m trying to change their idea of what it means to be a man,” he said. “These people are coming from a very patriarchal society. The man of the house is the man of the house.”

Serjanej said he understands these attitudes and why the men have them.

“Albania is a very patriarchal society,” he said. “When I was growing up, once in a while my dad would get physically violent with me. We didn’t have a Department of Social Services. Women had no way to complain [about abuse], and it was socially unacceptable for them to do so.”

He said one of the things he tells the men who attend his workshops is that even if their wives do not complain to the police, other people might.

“Even if the wife is silent, outsiders can call the police,” he said.

“I tell them that if you get upset, you cannot use your hands,” Serjanej continued. “I tell them that you can only talk and that you should talk in a quiet voice. A real man doesn’t have to get physical. I try to convey that they can use their mouth and voice and be respected in this country by all.

“I don’t want people to end up in trouble for something they think is acceptable,” he added. “The idea is to protect them so they don’t have any criminal records. They really need to understand how to live a clean life.” In the workshops, Serjanej talks about the age of consent and rape laws and how it’s illegal to kick or otherwise abuse dogs and cats.

Assimilating into a new culture is very stressful, Serjanej said.

“Refugees get culture shock,” he said. “They have certain expectations, and when they reach this country, things are not as great as they thought they would be.”

But people are optimistic and eager to figure things out.

“The good news,” Serjanej said, “is that they are open to life in the United States.”

The next two Family Life and Law workshops will focus on domestic violence. A workshop at noon on July 12 will be geared toward Burmese men, and a workshop at noon on July 16 will be for Burmese women. Workshops will be held at 991 Broadway in downtown Albany.