



Elizabeth Gervais-Gruen

Elizabeth Gervais-Gruen has a lifelong commitment to immigration law, and she has been named as “one of the most distinguished pioneers in immigration law.” Even though her contributions have gone far beyond the boundaries of Chapel Hill, her influence in the town has been profound.

Coming to the United States from Hungary as a young child, Elizabeth believed that a person could achieve anything in this country, and she chose to attend law school—no small task for a woman in that time. As a lawyer, she wanted to be involved with people new to this country and to try to understand their motivations for coming to the United States. She began with pro bono assistance to WWII-era refugees, working tirelessly to unite families, help immigrants gain citizenship, and encourage international students stay in school long enough to complete their degrees.

In the 1950’s, Elizabeth conducted a consular- oriented immigration practice at posts throughout Europe. She relocated to Chapel Hill when the Immigration and Naturalization Service opened a sub-office in Charlotte. She was one of seven founders of the Carolinas

Chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) and served as its chapter chair. She also was chair of the North Carolina State Bar Association's Immigration and Nationality Committee.

Elizabeth practiced immigration law until she was 90. Throughout her career, she generously transferred her personal and professional knowledge by mentoring new attorneys, offering guidance and assistance to scores of lawyers each year. In 1999, the AILA established the Elizabeth Gervais-Gruen Mentoring Award, recognizing her four decades of mentoring attorneys throughout the United States.

When she arrived in Chapel Hill in 1976, Elizabeth felt very well received and recalls that residents introduced her to many interesting people. She embraced the opportunities to meet and make new friends and tried to help in communicating with those who were not familiar with the town.

Thinking back to the welcoming presence of the town, Elizabeth hopes that Chapel Hill will continue its interest in new arrivals and will help them find constructive ways to contribute, not only to the community but also to the betterment of themselves. The many people who have been privileged to work with Elizabeth Gervais-Gruen would agree that she has in many ways been the woman who fought for them and been their guiding light.