

Feature News

She fights for immigrants

'Tough as nails' Sister Cecilia Chen is on the staff of Catholic Legal Services

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Marlene Quaroni - Florida Catholic

MIAMI — Sister Cecilia Chen is under five feet tall, 70 years old and tough as nails.

“The immigration judges don’t know what to do with her,” said Randy McGroarty, supervising attorney for **Catholic Legal Services** of the Archdiocese of Miami.

Sister Chen converted to Catholicism in her native Taiwan. She became interested in religious life when Bishop Stanislaus Lokuang of the Diocese of Tainan, in Taiwan, who later became the archbishop of Taipei, introduced her to the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. She had seen the example of the Vincentian Fathers and the Daughters of Charity in her country.

“I entered the (Handmaids) in Rome and then went to Loyola in Spain for my novitiate, from there I went to Tokyo, Japan to work at the international school run by our congregation,” she said. “I then went to Ireland and England to study. I received a bachelor’s degree in English literature, and a master’s degree in philosophy and spirituality.”



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Taiwan-born Sister Cecilia Chen of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is an accredited immigration representative who has worked for Catholic Legal Services of the Archdiocese of Miami since 2002.

Sister Chen came to the United States in 1986 and worked for Catholic social services in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

“I was going to work in a retreat house when a sister who worked in immigration became ill,” she said. “My superior said that it would be good for me to see what the U.S. Catholic Church does for people.”

That is how Sister Chen became involved in immigration and refugee resettlement. She worked in that area for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia until 2002, when she came to Miami and joined the staff of Catholic Legal Services.

“In 1989, I received full accreditation from the Board of Immigration Appeals,” she said. “I worked on asylum cases based on religious and political persecution. Many immigrants have gone through a terrible time. I have to prove extreme hardship; whether they have a mother, spouse or children here; whether they’ve committed a minor crime.”

The judge weighs all the circumstances and decides if they are eligible for residency. Sister Chen said she makes sure clients are well-prepared to go to court and are on time. “I will not take a case that’s not possible to win. Most of the cases that I take get approved.”

McGrorty said Sister Chen is strict with her clients.

“She makes sure that they have all the documents ready,” he said. “It’s critical for their lives.”

Judges at the immigration court in downtown Miami had high praises for her.

“She never lost a case with me,” said Judge Denise Slavin. “It’s nice to see that her clients aren’t nervous. They’re confident when they come to court.”

Judge Stephen Mander called her a very special advocate on behalf of her clients. “She’s always prepared and ready to go.”

Sister Chen said she is very happy to help people and let them know that the Church is concerned about their welfare.