

Armenia-Born Pentecostal Appointed Illinois District Court Judge

Sam Der-Yeghiayan came to the United States and attended Evangel University, thanks to an Assemblies of God missionary

The first person of Armenian heritage to ever become a federal judge keeps a low public profile. Sam Der-Yeghiayan (dare-yea-ge-yan) doesn't grant interviews, to avoid giving political adversaries fodder for misconstruing his Christian views.

But that doesn't stop others from loudly applauding his accomplishments.

The one-time Assemblies of God missionary who helped him enter the United States isn't surprised that his protégé now sits on the U.S. District Court for Northern Illinois.

"Sam always had the drive to be somebody and not just be another person," said William Ilnisky, pastor of Lighthouse Christian Center International in West Palm Beach, Fla. "That's what made me willing to invest time in him and help him out."

Born in Syria but raised in Lebanon, 52-year-old Der-Yeghiayan came from a Christian family. But as a teen he generally spent more time with gangs than in church, Ilnisky said.

The two met soon after Ilnisky went to Beirut in 1969 to establish a campus ministry near American University. His

first year the missionary also taught at a high school for Armenians.

While Der-Yeghiayan “played a lot of games,” at 18 he accepted Christ and was filled with the Spirit, telling Ilnisky, “I’ve traded my gun for a sword.”

Despite this change, “I realized if he stayed in Lebanon he would probably be dead quickly because of uprisings between Muslims and Christians,” Ilnisky recalled. “In Lebanon, everyone carried a gun for protection.”

Because of his connections to Evangel College, which became a university in 1998, Ilnisky arranged for Der-Yeghiayan to obtain a visa and enroll. His first home in Springfield, Mo., was with the school’s president, the late Robert Ashcroft, father of U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft.

After obtaining a social sciences degree, Der-Yeghiayan went on to the Franklin Pierce Law Center in Concord, N.H., and became a naturalized citizen. After graduating in 1978, he became a trial attorney for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in Chicago.

Four years later Der-Yeghiayan became counsel for the INS Chicago district, overseeing a three-state area. He held that post until becoming an immigration court judge in 2000, where he served until joining the federal court a year ago.

Rated “qualified” by the American Bar Association, Der-Yeghiayan was approved by Congress 89-0.

Der-Yeghiayan is the third Evangel grad to hold high public office. The others are Adm. Vern Clark, chief of U.S. naval operations, and Todd Tiahrt, a five-term congressman from Kansas.

The first alumnus on the federal bench, Der-Yeghiayan has a legion of admirers in Springfield. His alma mater recently presented him its 2004 Regius Award, which honors social sciences alumni for outstanding professional achievement.

While in Missouri Der-Yeghiayan visited Bryan Sanders' administrative law class, where the professor said the judge "captivated" his students.

A former real estate developer and attorney, Sanders believes the skilled graduate's integrity enables him to walk a fine line between his Christian beliefs and upholding the law.

The professor is also impressed with the judge's humility, saying "it's like a breath of fresh air" to see someone of importance avoiding an arrogant stance.

"He's very well reasoned and cautious in the things he says and does," Sanders said. "He's not a knee-jerk judge. I think that's what has gotten him credibility. I didn't perceive in him a political bent. He truly looks to the written law."

Robert Spence, who succeeded Ashcroft as president and knew Der-Yeghiayan his senior year, remembers a focused, dedicated student—one who opened a pizzeria during college to help pay his tuition.

Sometimes challenged by struggles with language differences, Der-Yeghiayan “had to work a little harder and excelled,” Spence said. “It was obvious to those who knew him that he was going somewhere.”

J. Calvin Holsinger, a semi-retired professor who continues to teach a course in public history, echoes that sentiment. He described his former student as a “go-getter,” and Holsinger said he was touched by the people who came from long distances to attend the spring dinner honoring the Evangel graduate.

“People from his past who heard about it made an effort to be there,” said Holsinger, who heard the judge praised as a capable, helping person. “He seeks to do his best for the country.”

During Der-Yeghiayan’s swearing-in ceremony, Attorney General Ashcroft said the Founding Fathers knew individuals who would lead this nation best were those committed to fundamental maxims of liberty.

“This nation needs more men and women, more boys and girls, who will follow in Sam’s footsteps,” Ashcroft said, the Chicago Daily Law Bulletin reported.

On Evangel’s campus, many would add a hearty, “Amen.”

Ken Walker