

firmprofile

Kah Lawyers, Parramatta



For accredited immigration law specialist Michael Kah, it was an infamous and tragic event half a world away that kick-started his career as an immigration lawyer.

Kah, the principal of Kah Lawyers in Parramatta, remembers clearly how, as a young lawyer working in a commercial firm in the city, he embarked on the road to becoming recognised as one of Australia's best immigration lawyers.

"In June 1989, the Tiananmen Square massacre occurred," says Kah. "At the time, I was working in a small commercial firm and I was the honorary solicitor for the Chinese welfare association in Haymarket. [After the massacre] the association was flooded with Chinese students saying: 'We can't go back. What can you do to help us?' The [association] didn't know what to do, so they said, 'You'd better go and speak to Michael Kah.' It all started there."

From these events emerged Kah's passion for immigration law, which eventually became the focus of the legal practice he established in Parramatta in 1992.

"I saw that immigration law was a very technical area, so there is lots of black letter law but also a huge human side to it. If I can successfully guide an application or appeal, it will make an incredible difference to the client. I find it so rewarding ... to be involved, particularly in family reunion and refugee cases. I regard them all as wonderful, miracle stories," says Kah.

Kah Lawyers has now grown into a well-recognised hub for expertise in all aspects of immigration law, from families seeking reunion to multinational companies sponsoring skilled workers, and Kah has twice received peer-nominated accolades through the *Australian Financial Review* for excellence in his field. And, says Kah, his journey through the years as an immigration lawyer has presented many changes.

"When I started, the migration legislation was only a couple of centimetres thick. Since then, it has become a highly prescriptive area. The normal discretions in decision-making, where the Department of Immigration could basically do anything, have been reduced.

"It is now a highly codified system," he says.

As well as holding the view that Australia's migration policies are primarily revenue-based, with little room for humanitarian or compassionate grounds, Kah sees the evolution of the law as having both positive and negative components.

"In one sense, [the system] is very transparent and objective. The other side is that there is very little discretion, so all the peripheral cases, where applicants may not meet the requirements, but in which there are many family and community reasons why the case should be considered, are often lost in the system. There has been a push towards prescription, which means a lot of people have missed out who would have been very good Australian citizens," he says.

And Kah believes there will be further changes in the field – such as international adoption – with the legal landscape evolving enough to keep him and his colleagues, Robert Liu and Donald Chen, not only extremely busy, but also very interested.

Claire Chaffey