

survive Katrina. He had to file bankruptcy. "I lost it all," he says.

Then, in the spring of this year, the Mississippi Center for Justice hired Morse to help provide post-Katrina legal services for Gulf Coast residents, a job made possible by a fellowship from Equal Justice Works, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fighting for underdog communities and causes. Morse now works at the center's Katrina Recovery Office in Biloxi, fighting to coax the state of Mississippi to use federal funds to restore housing for the state's poor and minority residents.

The job has been perfect for Morse. "It means my family can go forward, for one thing," he says. "It's also a lawyer's dream. It's work you can throw your whole heart into. It's a just cause, and every lawyer loves a just cause."

Morse's biggest fight? Getting the state of Mississippi to more quickly release the \$5.1 billion in federal community block grant money meant to rebuild homes and lives. The pace has been frustratingly slow, and the criteria established by the state has so far left tens of thousands of poor homeowners and renters with little more shelter than the trailers provided by the Federal Emergency Management

Agency (FEMA). Everywhere Morse looks, he says, the recovery of the poor is being overlooked.

So Morse has sharpened his underdog instincts and built alliances. He found an ally in the Mississippi casino industry, a onetime nemesis of his public interest practice. The casinos need their workers back. And to get their workers back, their workers need homes.

"You can't expect them to do their job if they're stuck in these tin boxes," Morse says of the thousands still living in FEMA trailers.

Working with a coalition of minority and advocacy groups, Morse has helped create the Steps Coalition. The name is not an acronym. "It comes from what the storm did here," he says. "For many, there's nothing left but the steps to their home or office."

Still, Morse says, the pace is so slow. The state is just now adjusting its rebuilding aid policy to include more homeowners and some renters. He continues to scour the region, looking for those who've been overlooked and ignored — the underdogs.

"Everybody is anxious for this to go more quickly," Morse says. "But there appears to be a lot of caution."

REBUILDING THE AMERICAN DREAM



Gregory Siskind

Early lost in the horror stories of Katrina is the storm's impact on those with the most precarious grip on the American Dream. Thousands of immigrants — workers, students, teachers, asylum-seekers — were displaced by the storm. Not only that, the very future of their life in the United States was put in jeopardy. To ensure legal resident status, immigrants need stable housing and employment. Students

need to be fully enrolled in classes. But Katrina destroyed housing, wiped out employers and closed college and university campuses.

Gregory Siskind, a 15-year immigration attorney from Memphis, saw the danger. He also knew that help for those in need would be particularly hard to come by, as dozens of immigration attorneys were uprooted by the storm, which also closed federal immigration offices and affected the Mid-South's entire framework for working with immigrants.

The founding partner of Siskind Susser Bland, Siskind was appointed chairman of the American Immigration Lawyers Association's Katrina Task Force. The task force's job is to help dozens of immigration attorneys affected by the storm re-establish their practices.

For a while, the National Immigration Service moved its offices and caseload from New Orleans to Memphis, which created a challenge for immigrants and their attorneys. So Siskind helped mobilize local attorneys to handle immigrants' cases until their attorneys could get back up and running.

Siskind recalls the case of a Tulane University student — attending the New Orleans school on a student visa — who found herself uprooted and living in Washington, D.C. Now, because her university was closed, she was at risk of becoming an illegal alien.

Another case involved a foreign-born faculty member of Louisiana State University who was suddenly left without a job — and in danger of losing his legal resident status.

Time and again, Siskind says, foreign workers were left high and dry by the winds and waters of Katrina. Legal immigrants working in the service industry were forced to leave the country when the small businesses that employed them were wiped out. And who knows how many undocumented workers have been left jobless and homeless by the storm, he asks.

But Siskind is quick to point out that the immigration service did

show flexibility and empathy for those whose lives were uprooted. Deadlines were often extended; rules weren't always immediately enforced, which gave people more time to find sanity in their lives.

"The Immigration Service did a pretty good job, overall," he says.

Siskind says that while schools have reopened and some employers have started staffing up again, much work remains to be done. For the past several years, the Mid-South has been attracting waves of immigrants because of the high job growth. Because of this, Siskind estimates 100,000 to 200,000 immigrants in the Gulf Coast region were affected by the hurricane.

The region is now attracting thousands more undocumented foreign workers drawn to the recovery efforts. It has created a microcosm of the national immigration issue, Siskind says. With so many immigrant workers, services and resources aren't making their way to everyone in need — but without the workers, the region may not get rebuilt.

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