Odd Fine, L’14, values personal interaction. It motivates him in his work. It also motivated him as he prepared for the career he has now. Fine earned his Duquesne law degree taking night classes while working for the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) office in Monroeville.

“I took a break from studying one day and ran into my daughter going up the stairs. I looked at her and asked, ‘When was the last time I talked to you?’” he recalled. “It had been more than a week since I’d seen my kids. With their school and swimming schedules and my school and work, we just never saw each other.”

His daughter was in high school at the time and his son would be soon. Knowing he had limited time, he altered his schedule to study in the early mornings and spend more time with his family. It would not be the first time his personal ethics drove a change.
Fine is a private practice attorney helping immigrants gain residence in the United States. He arrived at the work after more than two decades with the U.S. government, first as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Air Force and then for nine years with USCIS, during which time he earned his law degree at Duquesne. He launched his practice in 2019.

His career has taken him from checking for problems to finding answers for immigrants seeking opportunity in the United States. He works at a time when the subject of immigration is more fraught than it has been in years.

**THEN AND NOW**

The story of Pittsburgh and the story of Duquesne both connect to the immigrants who created and built the city and region. More than 150 years ago the individuals arriving to the bustling industries at the intersection of the three rivers were German, Polish, Irish and Italian. Today, immigrants still come here, this time creating new communities of Indian, Somali, Bosnian, Nepalese and Uzbek residents, among others.

National attention to immigration has intensified. Duquesne graduates work in related professions, conduct research or perform services connected to immigration. From USCIS and U.S. Customs and Border Protection to private security firms, law firms and activist nonprofits, Dukes work with immigrants and refugees all over the nation and the world.

Just as the American public had varying opinions on immigration at the time of the University’s founding, the issue is as polarizing today. Many Dukes in the field declined to share their stories for this article. For the few who did talk, tones were measured—but also reflective, focused on the human experiences of people moving across and through borders.

“Duquesne developed my heart and spirit, as my mind was already in that helping mode.”

Having seen both sides, and drawing on what he says is the better appreciation for gray areas thanks to his education at Duquesne, Fine’s long perspective on immigration, borders and citizenship shows the relevance of an ethics-centered education.

**GRAYER SHADES OF GRAY**

“I look at all cases the same, when I was at USCIS and in my work now,” Fine says. “Is there a way to help this person?”

In the Air Force, Fine understood judgment calls as “right, wrong or dead.” As an immigration services officer, with personal and family stories abutting the interpretation of policy, Fine often saw cases with gray areas.

When supervising officers in the USCIS office—people evaluating all types of immigration cases—Fine was sought for guidance on complex cases.

“Duquesne developed my heart and spirit, as my mind was already in that helping mode,” he says. “One of my professors said that law school makes you look at the world differently. It shaped not only how I look at legal information—it made me look at everything differently.”
After law school, Fine appreciated the abundance of gray in helping people find the way to work in the United States and perhaps to becoming citizens. His experience as a gatekeeper makes him keenly aware of what clients will face and ways to help them navigate the immigration process.

Immigration logistics go beyond the individual’s quest for a visa or green card. An enormous amount of information is in place right from the start.

“The U.S. government knows more about most immigrants than they know about their own citizens,” Fine says. For people entering the country legally, the U.S. maintains information in a central database that holds the point of entry, their fingerprints, their intentions and their general movements.

For those present illegally, such information obviously is not so well collected, though the Department of Homeland Security maintains estimates.

**HANDLING THE SURGE**

Fine sees complicated workplace issues arising from the state of the immigration system. In 1986, President Ronald Reagan issued an order granting amnesty to any immigrant in the U.S. who had entered the country prior to 1982, meaning that if they identified themselves they could apply for the requisite documents to work and pursue citizenship. Wait times for green cards exploded. Fine says the present wait time for Mexican nationals is roughly 23 years. For people from India, the wait is between 13 and 17 years.

Increased demand created logistical challenges. When Fine started his career, he and his colleagues had more time to review applicants and, when they encountered issues, resolve them—generally giving people the benefit of the doubt. As the workload increased, time with people declined, and Fine thought the demand precipitated a drift in focus.

“It felt we had moved to finding reasons to say no,” Fine says, “rather than giving the benefit of the doubt anymore.”

Fine wanted to serve others and sensed he was not. So, he changed direction. He does not think it was necessarily a fault of USCIS. The workload increased. USCIS had fewer agents. The pressures increased.

**SURPRISE ROYALTY AND CULTURAL CRIMES**

Fine reviewed a citizenship application from an individual who seemed an easy pass: clean record, in-demand field, papers in order. Interviewing the applicant, Fine got to the questions included in every application but that are almost never answered affirmatively. He asked if the person held a title of royalty in another nation. To his surprise, he learned he was interviewing someone with just such a title.

The same section of the U.S. Constitution that houses the emoluments clause also prevents those with titles of nobility from becoming citizens. Fine says it’s safest to say that with the current state of immigration, if a person has any doubt about immigration status or the way forward, it’s best to contact an attorney who specializes in immigration. The constantly changing rules and focus of enforcement make immigration one of the most complex of legal issues. Fine compares it to tax law in its intricacies.

**FACE TO FACE**

The immigration conversation just before press time had settled behind other political issues. The headlines were not so prominent. But the work continued.

Fine notes that some of the rhetoric makes helpful discussion a challenge—for instance, the exaggeration of some headlines.

“People say that President Obama deported more people than President Trump,” Fine says. “That’s not true. Obama did order more people deported, but the Trump administration actually deported more people. There is a big difference in ordering a deportation and actually carrying it out.”

Out of the 9,000 cases Fine reviewed while at USCIC, he denied 5 to 10 percent who applied, and of those, only a single person was deported.

“Denied does not necessarily mean deportation,” Fine says. “Often it just means we haven’t resolved the issues yet.”

Resolving issues motivates him. He wants to help, as did all of the people who talked about immigration for this story, regardless of their role being in advocacy, enforcement, processing or other areas. Fine values working with people, face to face, to help.

“It is frustrating to put in too much effort to go in the wrong direction,” Fine says. “Every case is different, and now I can choose which cases I take. I can help people achieve their dream.”