

Imperial/Baja MOU – for CCN on CountInfo Web scripted: 4/8/09

This was an historic occasion in El Centro! Officials from the Superior Court in Imperial County and from the Mexican state of Baja California signed a collaboration agreement. It's designed to coordinate services to help self represented family law litigants on both sides of the border. Such cooperation is critical in this community, where the border often divides families, and where daily life is truly bi-national. As many as 50,000 people a day commute from Mexico to Imperial County to work.

Hon Donal B. Donnelly: *“The reality of our lives is that we share so much together on both sides of the border through families, friendships, education and employment, border trade and commerce, education, sports, recreation, we're part of the same community. And we just found that legal issues and opportunities arose that required a bi-national response.”*

It's all part of a much broader bi-national justice initiative that this court started in 2004; which includes a partnership with the University of Baja California in Mexicali. Bi-lingual law students can earn credits as unpaid interns in the Imperial court's self help center.

Diane Altamirano, Sr. Court Managing Attorney: *“They study U.S. law; they study California law as part of their curriculum.”*

And they have the cultural sensitivity to do the job well.

Robby Contreras, Professional Intern 2: *“The people they help are really appreciative and feel very comfortable with the services they're receiving.”*

The Mexican students say it is gratifying work.

Martha Gonzalez, UABC Law Student: *“Helping people; that they come to you and they're very grateful for what you did and the help you gave them.”*

Plus the extra hands in the self help center make a big difference.

Diane *“When school is in session, and we have the interns, we can always see more people. We can just triple the number.”*

Granted, sometimes the details of international arrangements are complicated; but well worth the trouble.

Hon Raymond Cota *“We're taking the extra step and if it's complex, so be it. Maybe we'll figure out how to make it un-complex in the future for other people.”*

Daniel De Los Santos, UABC Law Student: *“We are separated by a big fence, it doesn't mean that we don't care about each other.”*

So this cross-border alliance will continue and expand – guided by an inspired philosophy.

Jose Guillen, Imperial Superior Court CEO: *“I would say approach it as building bridges and relationships and everything else will follow.”*

I'm Leanne Kozak reporting California Courts News from Imperial County.