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Sixth Annual TWITA Awards: Recognizing Excellence in the Profession

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By Marc Garfinkle | March 18, 2022 at 11:30 AM



Good news, dear readers: It's time for the TWITA Awards! As in years past, this prestigious accolade is awarded annually to individuals and groups or organizations that have represented the legal profession in an exemplary

manner and have rendered great service to society and/or the legal profession. The selection process is grueling, but a nightcap and some classical music takes the edge off.

We have learned that the troublesome Union for the Protection of Consonants (UPC)—still fuming from last year’s slate of TWITA honorees (attorneys Kamala Harris, Jaynee LaVecchia and Fabiana Pierre-Louis)—has discovered the identity of this year’s winner and has accused the TWITAs of systemic anti-consonantal bias. They threaten suit unless this year’s winners demonstrate a vowel-to-consonant ratio more representative of the population. We made it clear that the TWITA Awards will not negotiate with terrorists.

In truth, the Committee struggled mightily to identify candidates whose names were consonant-heavy. At first, we even restricted our search to ethnic communities where names commonly sport combinations such as “czs” and “schr” and “Ng.” Counsel advised us against such ethnic and alphabetic profiling, and ultimately, we chose the best candidate despite his provocative name.

Our 2022 honoree is not a member of the New Jersey Bar, although his application for admission is pending. Ahmet Seyithanoglu, at 31, is the youngest-ever recipient of the TWITA. He is a lawyer and a humanitarian and a human rights activist who has epitomized the values of the TWITA Award. His background is fascinating, and his present conundrum is worth your contemplation.

A citizen of Turkey, but now a resident of New Jersey, Ahmet attended the Marmara University Law School in Istanbul, an important law school in Turkey and well-reputed throughout the Middle East. In 2014 he received a

Bachelor of Laws (LL.B.), which he describes as the rough equivalent of an American J.D. Recognizing Ahmet's exceptional academic performance, the Turkish Ministry of National Education awarded him a scholarship to pursue a master's degree in legal studies in the U.S. He was accepted to the LL.M. program at The George Washington University Law School in D.C.

In July 2016, while Ahmet was still a student at GWU, back home there was a failed coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. This was followed by a merciless crackdown on Erdogan's opposition, with the government committing human rights violations on a wholesale scale. In Washington, Ahmet became a vocal and prominent opponent of the Turkish government. His words and his image were broadcast widely around the world, as was a brief interview he had with Fox News.

In April 2017, Ahmet learned that the Turkish Government had cancelled his scholarship, and it was clear that he would be persona non grata in his homeland. Three weeks later, he received his LL.M. from GWU and put on hold any plans to return to Turkey.

Today, Ahmet is a member in good standing of the state bars of New York, Texas and Maryland. He maintains a busy practice in New York where he specializes in immigration matters but offers all sorts of legal assistance to Turkish emigrants, particularly those that he describes as "escaped and persecuted." His New Jersey neighbors, some of whom speak only Turkish, use his services for immigration matters, but he cannot serve them more broadly without the New Jersey bar. He lives here and wants to move his office to New Jersey, so he applied for admission to the bar. His application was denied for fundamental reasons. It has been submitted for review to the Supreme Court.

Not unreasonably, New Jersey requires all bar applicants to be graduated from an ABA-accredited law school with a degree of J.D. or its equivalent. That is a double whammy for Ahmet. Mamara University is not accredited by the ABA, and Ahmet does not have a J.D., so even if he could establish that his LL.B. is equivalent to a J.D., he will never return to law school, and so, despite his good standing in three other states, he is ineligible in New Jersey without a special accommodation.

Leaders in the Turkish community have written in support of his application. They speak of the scarcity of Turkish speaking lawyers in New Jersey, and how much more Ahmet could do to help fill the void. They praise his accessibility, helpfulness, generosity, and his genuine concern for his people.

He has taken a special interest in the plight of his legal colleagues in Turkey, many of whom were also outspoken opponents of the regime. They are being eliminated and imprisoned for their opposition to Erdogan's administration. Among the groups he actively supports are The Arrested Lawyers Initiative, The Advocates of Silenced Turkey, and the Turkish Cultural Center of New Jersey. They all count on him for advice and support.

Each year, he provides well over 100 hours of pro bono legal services and accepts many "low bono" immigration cases, where he provides services for a fraction of his normal fee. His is not a hardship case; his practice is thriving, and he finds the time and the means to support his charitable and political interests. Ahmet Seyithanoglu exemplifies the values of TWITA, and we add our voice to those asking that he be granted admission to the bar in his adopted home state of New Jersey.

This year, there will be no TWITA Award for a group or organization. We are holding that in abeyance to be awarded later to groups that distinguish themselves providing legal services to refugees and immigrants.

Modern warfare, climate upheaval, authoritarian politics and violent Jihad have caused population shifts that are more sudden and dramatic than ever before. In the coming months and years there will be streams of refugees filling our shores and airports to escape tyranny and terrorism around the world. The need for lawyer volunteers will multiply quickly, but the number of lawyers will not.

Only lawyers can do what lawyers do, and the world has never needed us so much. Perhaps the example of Ahmet Seyithanoglu will spur you to lend a hand.

That's What I'm Talking About. See you next year.

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