

ATTORNEYS
OF THE YEAR
2019



JESSICA L. KOMETZ

BASSFORD REMELE

The professional runner came to the U.S. in 2018 on a six-month visa to run a marathon. Before the visa ran out, people in his home community learned he was gay.

“El Salvador is very unfriendly to gay men,” said Amie Penny Sayler, a litigator for Bassford Remele. The client (called J.A.A. in court filings to protect his identity) might be hurt or killed if he went home.

“Violence against LGBT people doesn’t just come from the community,” said Jessica Kometz, a Bassford attorney who submitted briefings about conditions in El Salvador. “It’s the military, the police; it’s very pervasive.”

In May 2019, a month after his visa expired, J.A.A. was arrested on a DUI charge and detained by ICE. “When we got the

assignment in late July, the [asylum] hearing was set for early August,” Penny Sayler said. “We got it kicked to October 3.”

That gave Kometz and Penny Sayler time for their real challenge: getting J.A.A. to trust them despite language and cultural barriers. Multiple jail visits helped build that trust; they convinced him to emphasize his sexuality as the nexus of the persecution he faced.

“He had never talked about his sexuality,” Penny Sayler said. “He had to talk about it in open court and even be cross-examined about it.”

Not knowing how DHS might attack J.A.A.’s asylum application, the two attorneys prepared him to endure four hours of testimony and cross-examination. The judge granted asylum that day. — *Holly Dolezalek*