With Drive (and Without a Law Degree), a Texan Fights for Immigrants
DALLAS — The calls from Malaysia come in daily to Ralph Isenberg, a Texas businessman who has become an unorthodox advocate for immigrants in extreme distress.

Ralph Isenberg is trying to help a 20-year-old student from Bangladesh return to the United States after being deported.

From the office of his commercial real estate company here, Mr. Isenberg confers by webcam with Saad Nabeel, a college student who once lived in Texas but now calls from Kuala Lumpur.

Mr. Nabeel’s mood shifts from hopeful cheer to reeling despair. And Mr. Isenberg reassures him, time and again, that despite the daunting odds, he will one day return to live in the United States.

The alliance of Mr. Isenberg, by his own description a hard-driving Jew, and Mr. Nabeel, a Muslim engineering student from Bangladesh who was deported last year, is one of the more unusual tales in the history of immigrants’ struggles to prevail in the American immigration system.

Mr. Nabeel’s case is one of several dozen that Mr. Isenberg has taken up in recent years, voluntarily and with singular zeal, often when lawyers have concluded that they are too hard to handle. And immigration cases do not come any harder than Mr. Nabeel’s.
Until a year ago, Mr. Nabeel, now 20, hardly thought of himself as an immigrant. He had been living in the United States since he was 3, when his father brought the family here because of threats from political adversaries in Bangladesh. Mr. Nabeel was studying electrical engineering on a full scholarship he won at the University of Texas, Arlington.

But in 2001, his father’s petition for political asylum was denied. A separate application for resident status was approved, but then it stalled in visa backlogs. In November 2009, immigration authorities detained Mr. Nabeel’s father and ordered the whole family deported. Mr. Nabeel was expelled to Bangladesh in January 2010.

Since then, Mr. Nabeel has become a refugee himself, fleeing in fright from Bangladesh to Malaysia. Now he is lying low there, longing for the United States.

And Mr. Isenberg sits in his Dallas office, plotting what he calls “creative” legal strategies to reopen Mr. Nabeel’s case, even though he is not a lawyer. In a stream of phone calls, he browbeats immigration officials, jawbones local reporters about the case and communes via video with Mr. Nabeel.

“This is not my job — it’s my mission,” Mr. Isenberg said after one recent coaching session with Mr. Nabeel, whom he has never met in person.

“Saad may not be a citizen, but he’s as American as anybody else. He’s a product of this country,” Mr. Isenberg said, “and we have an obligation to protect our own.”

As a former member of the Dallas Plan Commission, Mr. Isenberg has cut a high profile in this city. The first immigration case he undertook, the one that ignited his passion, involved his own family.

His second wife, Nicole, is from China. When Mr. Isenberg met her, he was married and she was working as a masseuse. She was in deportation proceedings after missing an immigration court hearing, Mr. Isenberg said, in a scandal that fascinated Dallas residents.

He and Nicole married, and Mr. Isenberg lobbied the authorities to reconsider her case. The couple moved to China, and over eighteen months Mr. Isenberg flew back across the Pacific more than a dozen times while he pressured American immigration officials to authorize a visa for Nicole. It was granted in 2007, and the family returned to Dallas.

“I have had my own experience with the immigration system,” Mr. Isenberg said, “and I got hurt.”

Since then, Mr. Isenberg has helped to free a Palestinian family with four children from a troubled immigration detention center in Taylor, Tex. Last year he won the release from a jail in Arizona of Hector Lopez, 21, a college student from Oregon who had been deported to Mexico. Mr. Lopez was detained after he returned to the border and turned himself in to apply for political asylum. Mr. Isenberg pressed officials relentlessly until they freed Mr. Lopez in time to join his mother in Oregon for Christmas.

Mr. Isenberg’s office is in one of several buildings he owns in Dallas, this one a bank building in a stylish suburb with a view of downtown. Enthusiastically patriotic, he has adorned his office shelves with models of the Lincoln Memorial and a bust of President John F. Kennedy.

Yet he has antagonized people with his assertive methods, including some who were on his side. Mr. Lopez’s first immigration lawyer, Siovhan Sheridan-Ayala, resigned after Mr. Isenberg became involved. Ms. Sheridan-Ayala said she could not comment on that decision as a professional matter.
Another immigration lawyer who has worked with Mr. Isenberg praised his determination. “He takes on the most difficult of cases,” said Josh Bardavid, whose office is in New York, and “he sometimes succeeds where standard methods would not.”

But, Mr. Bardavid added, his “unorthodox style can rile the authorities, but also occasionally his allies, especially where the publicity becomes overwhelming.”

Lawyers make Mr. Isenberg impatient. “I have a hard time finding lawyers who want to take a risk,” he said.

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A version of this article appeared in print on March 6, 2011, on page A17 of the New York edition.

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