

## Institute of Human Rights at Emory Gives Asylum Seekers New Hope

**M**D/PhD student Brandon Kohrt remembers his first political asylum case very clearly. A young man from Guinea, who had been imprisoned and tortured for political activism, had escaped to the U.S. and applied for asylum. Through the Atlanta Asylum Network,

Human Rights (PHR), a Boston-based nongovernmental organization, the Institute started the Atlanta Asylum Network, which organizes local health professionals to provide free physical and psychological evaluations and court testimony for survivors of torture in Atlanta, which is the third

largest refugee settlement in the U.S. ing conflict between Nepali government security forces and Maoist activists. Emory offered the perfect opportunity to pursue those interests. “Emory is a pioneering school in combining social sciences with medicine with an international focus,” he said.

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largest refugee settlement in the U.S. a program of Emory’s Institute of Human Rights which Kohrt coordinates, the man was examined by an Emory emergency medicine resident and received documented evidence that he had sustained injuries consistent with torture. Based on this affidavit, his asylum claim was approved, and he now attends college in Georgia.

“I am lucky to have met this brave and politically devoted man,” said Kohrt. “I hope that we were able to play a small part in helping him to follow his dreams and live without constant threat of persecution.”

Every year, nearly 700 people arrive in Atlanta seeking political asylum. Before being granted it, many must appear before a federal immigration judge to make the case that they fit the necessary criteria, which include having experienced persecution in their home countries, or having a well founded fear of such persecution on account of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. In these cases, it is the asylum seeker who carries the burden of proof, and proof of persecution is often difficult to come by. The odds are not good. In 2003, immigration judges in Atlanta approved only 3 percent of asylum cases that came before them, the lowest rate of approval in the U.S. Those denied asylum were deported back to the very countries they had fled.

Now the Institute of Human Rights at Emory has increased asylum seekers’ chances to stay in the U.S. by helping them attain documented evidence of persecution. In 2003, in cooperation with Physicians for

largest refugee settlement in the U.S.

“In many cases, asylum seekers have no documentation that they’ve suffered torture. But the body is testimony,” said Kohrt, who co-founded the Atlanta Asylum Network along with Institute of Human Rights Executive Director Dabney Evans and Emory Emergency Medicine resident Jeremy Hess. “You can look at the body and see, for example, very clear signs of certain types of abuse. Beating the soles of the feet leaves very clear traces. People who have been hanged by their arms have nerve damage. There are psychological signs as well, such as post traumatic stress disorder.”

Kohrt is an MD/PhD student in Emory’s department of anthropology and School of Medicine. He became

The Atlanta Asylum Network organizes workshops at Emory to develop a core network of physicians and psychologists in the Atlanta area. Workshops include training on how to recognize indications of different torture techniques, as well as sensitivity training in issues unique to torture survivors. For example, since in many cases doctors have been complicit in torture, physicians in the Asylum Network do not wear white coats or scrubs during examinations.

The Network now has twenty-five core doctors and five psychologists, but participation in the project encompasses many groups at Emory, including Emory College undergraduates who research and prepare briefs for physicians on the political situations of the countries from which their patients have fled.

Today, of the fifty-five asylum cases that have come through the Atlanta Asylum Network, 45 percent have been approved by immigration judges.



Last year, for his work with the Atlanta Asylum Network, MD/PhD student Brandon Kohrt received Physicians for Human Rights’ Navin Narayan Award, given to a student who has demonstrated leadership and dedication to health and human rights activism. (at left) Kohrt examines a patient in Nepal.

Emory Emergency Medicine resident Jeremy Hess, one of the founders of the Atlanta Asylum Network, examines a torture survivor from West Africa. Physicians in the Network do not wear white coats during exams, since in many cases survivors associate them with torture.

interested in the connections between health and human rights while on a Fulbright Fellowship in Nepal, where he observed the mental health impact of government neglect and the result-

“Asylum gives people a chance to start their lives over again,” said Kohrt. “There are a lot of problems with the system, but when it works, it’s part of the good story of the U.S.” 