Institute of Human Rights at Emory Gives Asylum Seekers New Hope

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, 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 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.

“In many cases, asylum seekers have no documentation that they’ve suffered torture. But the body is testimony.” —Brandon Kohrt

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“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.”