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

Based on this affidavit, 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.

“Emory is a pioneering school in combining social sciences with medicine with an international focus,” he said.

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.