

## REPORT FROM A NYWBA FOUNDATION FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT

*The New York Women's Bar Association Foundation, the 501(c)(3) organization created by the New York Women's Bar Association, provides a fellowship to a Columbia University Law School student to spend a semester working with the Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights. Below please find excerpts from the report done by Zeina Mobassaleh on her experience as the fellowship recipient last summer.*

Lawyer in Arabic literally means "protector." It captures the essence of what the law means to me: protection of the weak.

Growing up in various parts of the world, I escaped the many hardships I witnessed people endure in wartime in Lebanon: bombings, food shortages, and sometimes-fatal injuries were common occurrences for many of my friends and family. I often heard stories of torture and massacres and learned first-hand what it meant to live in a lawless society, where the strong could abuse the weak. Due to my Palestinian background, my life also could have easily been spent in poverty conditions in a refugee camp in Lebanon. I was fortunate enough to escape such oppression, but I always felt the tension of a life that existed in sharp contrast to the lives of those around me. Instead of relishing in my position of privilege, I chose to use it to help empower others.

Interning with Lawyers Committee for Human Rights this past summer felt like a pinnacle in a long road. I worked in the Asylum Project where I mainly focused on interviewing and screening potential clients. One of the main purposes of the Lawyers Committee includes the provision of pro bono legal services to indigent asylum seekers. By first screening potential clients, and then serving as consultants on asylum cases lead by pro bono attorneys at major law firms, the organization succeeds in providing relief to thousands of refugees escaping persecution in their countries.

In French, Arabic and English, I interviewed and screened dozens of asylum-seekers in detention centers and in the Lawyers Committee office. The stories of these persons were awe-inspiring and reminded me of the stories of torture and persecution I had heard growing up. Finally I was able to play a direct role in helping people escape oppressive regimes. I learned that giving people access to the legal system could help make a tremendous difference in their lives.

I am continuing to represent a client I interviewed this summer. This client, an Egyptian national, is hoping to escape religious persecution he has faced for most of this life. While he was living in Cairo, a friend of his began putting pressure on him early on in high school to convert from his Coptic Christian faith to Islam. This pressure was soon intensified when dozens of students, on many separate occasions, harassed him to and from school. On another occasion, our client was taken into police custody and detained without charge simply based on his identity as a Christian. This persecution climaxed one summer when our client was beaten and injured on two separate occasions by groups of Muslim boys who told him that he should convert to Islam. I am grateful for the opportunity to work on this

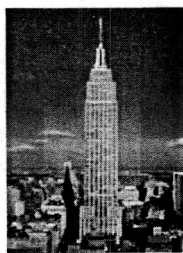
case, as I feel that I am making a great contribution to one individual's life as well as expanding my skills as a lawyer.

Another major project I worked this past summer included research for a survey of detention practices of asylum-seekers around the world. The project was very exciting as our office was able to communicate directly with foreign nationals regarding their countries' policies and compare various approaches to asylum-seekers. The survey is an important tool in lobbying authorities in the US to change their practice of detaining those who are fleeing persecution in their countries. (It can be viewed at: [http://www.lchr.org/refugees/asylum/country\\_reps.htm](http://www.lchr.org/refugees/asylum/country_reps.htm))

I learned so much from working with the staff attorney, program assistants, and program head at Lawyers Committee. They are all brilliant attorneys and activists, yet are extremely down-to-earth and approachable. Their wealth of experience was vital, as they were very encouraging and patient in teaching me the skills I needed.

I want to thank the Foundation once again for providing me the opportunity to gain and give so much this past summer. The financial benefits were crucial and the moral support was invaluable. The path to public interest law is a rather bumpy one, and I am grateful to the Association for making it a smoother ride.

*The New York Women's Bar Association Foundation is pleased with the successes it has achieved so far. The Foundation is supported by your tax-deductible donations. If you have any questions, please feel free to call Kathy Posner (212.894.6730), President of the Foundation.*



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