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I define my summer experience at The Advocates for Human Rights as a series of moments that seemed to carry me out of the United States. In one, a group of five strangers, shackled hand and foot and all briefly represented by one volunteer attorney, listen as a judge issues their Final Order of Removal. In another, a caller to the immigration phone line asks for my advice, “not as a lawyer but just as someone at least willing to talk to me”: her friend has gone missing trying to illegally enter the United States through the Arizona desert and she is too frightened to call the police. In the last, I, interpreting for a client in a meeting with his attorney, say words that are completely foreign to my own life experiences: “The military police threw me in a dark cell. There, they tortured me.” These incidents and numerous others throughout my eight weeks at The Advocates brought me into close contact with national and international human rights issues and allowed me to see firsthand the struggles that both legal and illegal immigrants can face in the American immigration system.

The Advocates for Human Rights is a non-profit nongovernmental organization in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The organization consists of four main divisions: the Women’s Program, the Education Program, Special Projects, and the Refugee and Immigrant Program, where I worked as an intern. The Refugee and Immigrant Program matches low-income clients who are seeking asylum with volunteer attorneys to assist them with their asylum cases. Asylum seekers are individuals who cannot return to their home countries because of a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, either by the government of their home country or a group that the government cannot or will not control. The process of applying for asylum, like most

immigration matters, is a long and complicated one, especially for newly-arriving migrants to the United States, who may not have information, resources, or a sufficient level of English to pursue their claims on their own. The Advocates offers the invaluable assistance of an experienced attorney who can navigate the system and offer the client a better chance of succeeding in his or her claim. Clients call the telephone hotline with questions ranging from deportation to permanent residency to asylum applications. Because of its limited resources, The Advocates can only handle cases of asylum, so other issues are referred to more appropriate legal assistance in the area. If a client seems to have an asylum claim, the intern handling the call does an initial intake interview, which then goes to the program director. If the director determines that the case is viable, the client comes in for a more formal intake interview where she explains why she is afraid to return to her home country and what persecution she has faced. The entire staff deliberates weekly on the results of these interviews, taking into account the client's report, the background conditions of the country, and the chances that the claim will succeed. About half of the cases are accepted in deliberations, and The Advocates prepares a write-up of the case's background and general country information to transmit the case to a volunteer attorney.

As an intern, I assisted in answering the client line and conducting the over-the-phone intake, sitting in on interviews, translating and interpreting for client meetings, researching background information on home countries, participating in deliberations, writing up reports for transmittal, and general office work. Each one of these duties offers a glimpse into the context of the immigration system and human rights abroad. In answering the client line, I heard countless stories of immigrants who had entered the U.S. illegally to work, of refugees who could not be reunited with their families, and of women who fled their countries because their governments do not enforce domestic violence laws. I looked up information on political

violence in Ethiopia, the Sudan, and Guinea, violence against women in Kenya and Mexico, the situation of orphans and street children in Kenya, and female genital mutilation in many parts of Africa. In interviews this information became startlingly real for me as vague news reports of violence and cold statistics solidified in the form of a frightened young woman or a man my brother's age sitting across from me describing the methods of torture they had undergone, the loved ones they had lost, and the risks they had taken to make it to America.

Once a week, I accompanied a volunteer attorney to the Immigration Detention Center to interpret for the Minnesota Detention Project, a separate organization that provides one-time representation to immigrants in the custody of the Department of Homeland Security who face deportation proceedings. Most of the immigrants at the detention center have little hope for staying in the U.S.; the majority entered illegally by crossing the border with Mexico and have no familial link, asylum claim, or extenuating circumstances that would allow them to petition for legal status. The days I spent at the detention center gave me a new vision of our immigration system. As part of the screening process, the attorneys always asked, "Are you afraid to return to your home country?" The responses to this question told of extreme poverty and desperate situations: compelling stories that nonetheless do not qualify for relief under the current immigration system. At the same time, many clients did not even consult with the attorney before telling us that they wanted to "sign the deportation order," in order to get out of jail as quickly as possible and "never return to America." It was at the detention center that I was able to sit in on the Immigration Court and see how deportation proceedings are conducted. This experience offers a viewpoint of the United States that most Americans have never seen and underscores the fact that human rights issues are not limited to distant countries.

My time with The Advocates was a very fruitful learning experience. The staff members were very encouraging and always willing to answer questions and share their knowledge in discussions about immigration policy. Additionally, the organization makes all of the interns feel that their support is appreciated; the Refugee and Immigrant Program in particular relies on the second and third language skills of the interns, their ability to communicate, and the perspective they bring to discussions as “outsiders” not trained in law. Although the internship exposed me to many frustrations of the legal system, it also showed me how powerful a tool the law can be in resolving human rights situations. In my final week with The Advocates for Human Rights, I had the wonderful opportunity to go with an attorney and client to receive the decision on his asylum case, and as a volunteer interpreter, to translate for him the words “You have been granted asylum in the United States.” Witnessing his joy and relief at that moment was an amazing privilege, and I am grateful to have had the chance to work at an organization that makes such concrete impacts in the lives of its clients.