

2008 Castan Centre Global Interns

Lucy Bradlow works with asylum-seekers in New York

On the very first day of my three month internship at Human Rights First in New York, a staff attorney told me that every day she is amazed by the novel ways human beings think up to inflict pain and suffering on each other. What was so poignant about her comment was that it reflected not just on the way refugees are treated in their country of origin, but also very often, in the country of asylum. I spent the next three months delving into the deep physical and emotional suffering and political contentions that surround asylum seekers.

My work at Human Rights First was divided into two main areas. The first task was to assist with the interviewing of asylum seekers and preparing their cases to be handled by pro-bono lawyers from New York's major law firms. I would sit in on interviews with asylum seekers from across the globe and listen to their horrendous, and yet fascinating, stories. I heard from a man from Chad, telling the story of how, one day he was a computer specialist and the next was being tortured for seeing dead bodies in a government building; and the testament of a Mexican man who was persecuted his whole life for being gay, just to name a few. I would then write-up and research their stories and provide a booklet for review to assess whether HRF could accept them as a client. To me, the most important lesson from this work was how, as we sat there trying desperately to fit a person into a Government created objective set of criteria to allow them any chance at asylum, we stripped these people who had already suffered so much of any notion of individuality, of personality. It is amazing how easy it is to forget that a young Egyptian man who was tortured for demanding an education free from corruption was still a young man, who, like me, enjoyed swimming!

The second aspect of my work was involved with HRF's extensive lobbying of the U.S. Congress to provide more support for the 4 million Iraqis who have been displaced by the current war. I was lucky enough to work on two research projects that were used at a roundtable conference in Washington DC in early February. The first looked at Operation Provide Comfort, which was a coalition enforced no-fly zone instituted in Northern Iraq immediately following the first Gulf War to protect the Kurds, and whether a similar solution could be used in the current Iraq conflict. Secondly, I researched previous air-lifts of particularly vulnerable refugees from crisis areas. Both projects were fascinating and increased my general knowledge on the current Iraq crises from almost nothing to almost expert! As a part of the research I attended two panel discussions hosted in Manhattan on the issue. The first looked at Iraqi fixers and the U.S. (and any coalition Government)'s refusal to provide an acceptable system of asylum for them. Fixers, as I learnt, are Iraqis who act as translators, and all round assistants for Western journalists. They are very often targeted by insurgents for providing assistance to the coalition, most particularly when the journalists have returned home or are practising 'hotel journalism'. The forum was hosted by the wife of American journalist Steve Vincent, who along with his fixer was kidnapped and shot in the back of the head in Iraq. When Vincent died,

his fixer survived and while Vincent's wife spent several years trying to get permission to bring her to the U.S., she had to remain in hiding in Syria. The other forum discussion looked at the Iraqi refugee crises through the eyes of photographers, documentary film makers and writers. It was hosted by renowned journalist George Packer who shared the stories of the many refugees for whom he wrote his play, *Betrayed*, which was premiered by HRF in early February. To say the stories of these incredible people were moving, would be a gross understatement.

On top of this truly incredible work I got to be a part of, I was also given the opportunity to live in Manhattan for three months. Discovering the city from my little Soho apartment, to my Chelsea office space and beyond, was probably the most wonderful experience of my life, and I can't thank the Castan Centre enough for giving me this chance.

The 2008 Global Interns

The 2008 Global Internship Program sent five outstanding Monash law students to work in some of the world's leading human rights institutions. Featured on these pages are the stories of Lucy Bradlow and Meredith Kennedy.

Lucy is a final year Law student who has volunteered at the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Services, the Asylum Seekers Resource Centre, and in-house at the Castan Centre. She has also tutored a young Sudanese boy for over a year. Meredith has been a legal volunteer at the Women's Legal Service Victoria, where she developed her appreciation for the difficulties faced by many women who deal with the legal system.

The other three interns, who were still on assignment as we went to press, are Harshani Dharmadasa, Chris Holt and Jihan Mirza. Harshani is at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague. She has volunteered at the Public Interest Law Clearing House, in-house at the Castan Centre and at the United Nations Regional Office in the United Arab Emirates. She also volunteered in Sri Lanka after the tsunami and is teaching English with the Sudanese refugee community in Footscray.

Chris has headed to the South African Legal Aid Board which provides legal services for the poor and vulnerable. Chris has taught English to refugee children through St. Vincent De Paul, has volunteered with Hanover Emergency Relief Shelter and the Deaf Blind Association. He has also volunteered overseas at orphanages in Nepal and Cambodia.

Jihan is on assignment with the Australian Delegation to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. Prior to studying at Monash, Jihan studied Arts at Melbourne University, where she was actively involved in student groups such as Students for Land Justice and Reconciliation and the Environment Collective. She has also volunteered at the Footscray Community Legal Centre, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre and the Fitzroy Legal Service.

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Meredith Kennedy works for women's rights in Malaysia

International Women's Rights Action Watch - Asia Pacific (IWRAW) was established in Malaysia to empower women to achieve substantive equality. The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women is at the centre of IWRAW's work. IWRAW encourages women's rights activists to use this UN treaty to lobby their governments to improve women's human rights. One of the aspects that I found unique and admirable about IWRAW was its focus on motivating women to take up the challenge of gender inequality and its determination to give them the capability to shape their own future. I began my internship at a particularly turbulent time in Malaysian politics, and I quickly saw how important IWRAW's role was in assisting domestic NGOs to disseminate this information on an international level. It encouraged domestic women's rights activists to turn domestic instances of discrimination into a powerful foundation for international advocacy.

One of the great features of my internship at IWRAW was meeting a broad range of women's rights activists. Although IWRAW is an international organisation, it has strong ties with regional NGOs, especially those in Malaysia. This net-



Top: Where's Lucy?

Bottom: Meredith (front, far right) with IWRAW colleagues

work gave me an even broader experience as it gave me access to the many different perspectives on how to overcome inequality. Moreover, it gave me the chance to learn more about domestic issues in Malaysia, especially the impact of the Islamic justice system on women. I had the opportunity to witness the handing down of the landmark *Subashini* case at the Federal Court of Malaysia and then to further explore the ramifications of this case for Malaysian women and families. The situation for women in Malaysia is particularly complex due to the nation's multicultural and multi-religious make up. The separation of civil and Islamic legal jurisdictions is generally to the disadvantage of Malaysian women. They are caught between a conservative interpretation of Islam by religious authorities and courts on the one hand, and a government which is unwilling to compromise the hegemony of the Islamic community by allowing Muslim women access to civil courts on the other.

During my time at IWRAW one of the projects I focused on was the creation of a Lawyers Training Manual. The manual will give lawyers the tools to integrate the women's convention into their domestic cases. My work included outlining the role of international law in generating progressive interpretations of statutes and case law. Specifically I presented several cases which were instrumental in bringing international legal norms into the domestic law of nation states, as well as highlighting how international law arguments could be introduced to improve the quality of legal pleadings.

I was also able to work on a research paper addressing Australia's compliance with its obligations under the Convention following the introduction of the Family Law Reform Act 2006. This experience gave me a much deeper understanding of Australia's family law, and the specific challenges which Australia needs to overcome in order to achieve its goal of gender equality.

Interwoven in Malaysia's history is its experience with colonizing powers: the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British. One of the highlights of my trip was taking a trip with my work colleagues to Malacca which was, at different points, a naval port for all three colonisers. Here we experienced unique Nonya cuisine and great shopping at the Night Market. I also had the opportunity to travel to Penang which had more amazing colonial architecture, and to Langkawi, the largest of an archipelago of islands. Malaysia's rapid economic development has made both road and air travel easy, efficient and inexpensive, which is a powerful incentive to get to know areas apart from Kuala Lumpur. Another great feature of Malaysia was the presence of a large south Indian minority which not only contributes fantastic food and culture, but also enriches Malaysia's activist and academic scene. Several Hindu groups are at the forefront of human rights activism, and are holding the Malaysian Government to account for its human rights abuses. These dynamic attributes of Malaysian society make it a fascinating place to live, while the growing agitation for human rights and recognition of their importance make it a rewarding place to work.