

# Gaining respect for refugees and those helping them

By Jessica Malin



Jessica Malin interviews a client at LHR

Photo: Matthew Willman/Oxfam Australia

When I left Australia, I had absolutely no idea what to expect from the internship at Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) in Durban, South Africa. The program, set up by Monash and Oxfam, is in its infancy and I knew very little about post-apartheid South Africa, except that it has incredibly high crime rates and has been tragically affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Along with my fellow interns, I began the program with orientation in Johannesburg where we visited the Apartheid Museum and the Hector Pieterson monument in Soweto. We also witnessed extreme poverty in a township close to the Monash South Africa campus (which I found to be in stark contrast to the immensely wealthy, predominantly white, security obsessed estates just down the road) and these experiences marked the beginning of my understanding of this complex and troubled country.

We then settled into Durban and I began work at LHR's Refugee Rights Project. I was seeing clients on my first day, and saw approximately twenty clients each day for the duration of the internship. LHR provides free legal advice and assistance to an enormous (and at times overwhelming) volume of asylum seekers and refugees who are desperately in need of these services. Without the representation provided by the dedicated staff at LHR, the voices of this vulnerable and traumatised group of people would not be heard. When assisting asylum seekers with their applications for refugee status and conducting informal refugee status determination interviews, I listened in amazement and often horror at my clients' stories of persecution in countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and especially Zimbabwe. I don't think I will ever cease to be mortified by the

suffering human beings are capable of inflicting upon one another, nor do I ever want to become desensitised to such terrible human rights atrocities.

I learnt a great deal about South African and international refugee law and developed a profound respect for the resilient people who work in such an emotionally exhausting area of law! Refugees are often considered to be a nuisance or a burden by governments all around the world and as a result, organisations working in refugee law are often underfunded, under-resourced and undervalued. The legal framework in which organisations like LHR operate is beset with restrictive definitions and complex legal concepts which make the law difficult to apply and almost impossible to explain to clients, especially without adequate translation services. The days are long and mentally taxing, and the work can be quite challenging, but it is rewarding nonetheless.

The thing that affected me the most during my time at LHR were the individual stories of courage and determination that my clients shared with me. After listening to people talk about the awful things they had seen and experienced, it was uplifting to learn that they never stopped fighting and striving to make their lives better.

I came away from the internship experience feeling so lucky to have been given an opportunity to work with amazing people and contribute to a project that has so much value. I'd like to thank all the people at the Castan Centre, for selecting me and supporting me, all my fellow interns who made my experience fun and entertaining, all the staff at Monash both in Australia and South Africa for their guidance and assistance, and all those at Oxfam and Lawyers for Human Rights for being such a great inspiration during my time in South Africa.