

SAFE HAVEN FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS



A model for attorneys representing asylees

By Christina Schweighofer

In their respective home countries, Anna and Rachel stood up for other women — until they too became victims, targeted specifically for their human rights activism. Both women fled to the United States, where their applications for asylum were approved thanks to the work of four students in the International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC) at the USC Gould School of Law.

Both Anna and Rachel (whose real names are withheld for their safety) are what the United Nations defines as Human Rights Defenders.

In Uganda, Rachel had raised funds for and been a key adviser to a female friend running for political office on a women's rights platform. Abducted by the military, she endured two years of torture and rape in captivity before she managed to escape in 2015.

In El Salvador, Anna worked as a government human rights lawyer. She had been investigating a sex-trafficking case when she was stopped on her way home one night. Two men got out of a car and shot her six times. Anna survived the attack and fled to the United States in 2016.

"Two IHRC legal teams represented Anna and Rachel in their applications for asylum, logging hundreds of hours of pro-bono work. The students interviewed the women to document their refugee claims. They gathered corroborating evidence, wrote legal briefs and represented the clients in interviews with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services asylum officers in Anaheim, California. One of those briefs is now used as a model by Human Rights First, a national human rights organization, to guide other attorneys representing asylees."

Henna Pithia '15 and Ana Luiza Sousa '16, two students on Rachel's team, spent weeks establishing trust with their client. "The last thing you want for a person who has experienced trauma is for them to feel they have no control over the case," said Pithia, who became an asylum officer in her first post-law school job.

After asylum was granted, the two human rights defenders commended their IHRC advocates for their compassion and skill.

"I give the students 100-percent credit," Rachel said. Speaking warmly of her experience working with Justin Bongco '18 and Roza Petrosyan '18, Anna described their relationship as "more person-to-person than just professional-to-client."

Anti-immigrant sentiment in America casts refugees as criminals or terrorists, observes IHRC founding director Hannah Garry.

"In fact most refugees are vulnerable women and children. Providing safety for these human rights defenders is in line with American values of upholding freedom, democracy and human rights."



Prof. Hannah Garry with IHRC students and a client

