

Malian girl's cry for help reaches Houston law school class

By Monica Rhor

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On a frosty December night, just after a rare Houston snowfall, the young woman from Mali pounded on the locked doors of her high school. Hours past the final bell, the building stood nearly empty, its classrooms cloaked in darkness.

Still, the teenager kept pounding.

For more than a year, she had prayed someone would glimpse the desperation beneath her quiet demeanor. At school, she was a diligent student, a quick learner who picked up English in a matter of months. But at home, she toiled in involuntary servitude, held hostage by a harsh and abusive aunt and the certainty of genital mutilation if she returned to her homeland.

In her bleakest moments, the girl would stare into the mirror, pleading with the reflection before her and the God who seemed so far away.

"Where are you going to put me? What is going to happen to me?" she would implore, feeling as though she were stranded in a desert - alone, abandoned, with no one to hear her cries.

Now, as she glimpsed a cleaning crew in the school hallway, all her frustration, fear, and fortitude rushed out.

There had to be someone who would help her, someone who would listen to her story. She would just keep knocking until they came.

In a classroom at the South Texas College of Law, students pore through files bulging with cases like that of the young Malian girl.

The stiffly worded legal briefs recap the tumult of lives upended by persecution, political turmoil and avarice: Vietnamese workers promised a better life only to end up imprisoned in cramped, foul-smelling apartments; Central American child immigrants left orphaned or abandoned to scrounge for scraps of food; African women seeking refuge from violent marriages.

In any other law school class, these would be textbook hypotheticals to dissect, discuss, and memorize. Not in Naomi Bang's Human Trafficking/Immigration Clinic.

In this class, students are assigned to represent real clients applying for asylum or a green card.

"The Bible says we have to help the widowed, orphaned, oppressed, imprisoned, 'the least of these,' " said Bang, an adjunct professor, senior attorney at [Foster Quan, LLP](#), and former assistant U.S. attorney who started the clinic in 2009. "I want the students to be moved to go out and do public service, to become professional, hardworking, committed advocates."

The students have a semester to build a solid case for their clients.

Sometimes they succeed. Sometimes they don't.

The Malian girl's journey, what she calls "the long bridge of my melancholy," began in a modest home in the Bamaka district of the landlocked African country. Born into the Bambara tribe, she paints her childhood as a happy time.

"I miss the me of that time, the innocent dreamer, the naive me," she wrote in a high school legacy book, an autobiographical collage of photographs and writings. "When you are little, you don't see the hard face of the world."

That innocence and naivete ended in August 2007, when her mother died of AIDS.

Her father, also ill from HIV, could not care for the family, so the following summer, the girl's grandmother sent her to live with an aunt in Houston.

"They said I could go to school and better myself when I got here," said the slender, long-limbed girl, who is not being identified in this article for safety reasons.

Just 15 when she arrived, the girl was still numb and reeling from her mother's death.

"I wasn't thinking right at the time. I had no feeling of nothing, no feeling of being scared," she explained. "My mom was not only my mother, she was my eyes to see the world, my ears to hear the world, and that was taken away from me."

Rather than salving the pain, coming to her aunt's house instead plunged the girl from dusk to pitch-black.

She became the household servant, expected to cook, clean, dust, do laundry, scrub floors. She was beaten mercilessly for any perceived shortcoming. Her aunt confiscated her passport and other identification, kept locks on the doors, and repeatedly reminded her that there was no place else to go.

The teenager's only connection to the outside world was school, where she told no one of her plight. No one ever asked.

"From the outside, everything looked normal. But to me, on the inside, none of this was normal," she said. "I was feeling bad inside. I wasn't good in my soul. I wasn't good in my body."

By 2011, the South Texas College of Law's [Human Trafficking Clinic](#) had scored some major victories.

Bang's students had helped secure visas allowing 15 Vietnamese human trafficking victims to remain in the country. Second- and third-year law students were clamoring to get into the class, and a long waiting list developed for the 10 coveted spots.

That fall, three of those places went to [Sheridan Green](#), a clean-cut father and husband from [St. George, Utah](#); [Jamie Lauren Morrison](#), a former eighth-grade teacher from suburban Cy-Fair; and [Sharon Sulami](#), the Houston-raised daughter of Israeli immigrants.

For Green, the clinic was a chance to delve further into his chosen field of law.

"You just meet a lot of deserving people in immigration law, people who really need your help," said Green, 30, who pauses uncomfortably when talking about himself but comes alive when the conversation turns to clients and cases.

For Morrison, 28, an aspiring criminal defense attorney, and Sulami, 26, who plans to go into commercial litigation, the class was an opportunity to sample immigration law.

Bang's students sacrifice countless hours outside class to do research, interview clients and draft briefs. Once a week, the class meets for a two-hour session that begins with "grand rounds" - a volley of rapid-fire questions from Bang.

She grills the students about the strengths and weaknesses of their evidence, the political history of the client's country, anything that might expose a gap in their legal argument.

"Naomi doesn't spoon-feed you. It's up to you to figure out of the cause of action," said Green. "But the class is self-motivating because you know someone's life is in your hand."

That semester, the life in jeopardy - the case that would consume Green, Morrison and Sulami - was that of the teenager from Mali, whose pleas on a cold December night eventually reached her teachers, then the FBI, and finally an immigration attorney at [Catholic Charities](#).

By the time the students got the case, nearly two years had passed since the girl had scrambled from her aunt's house after a particularly brutal beating.

She had gone to live with a teacher and graduated from high school, but her immigration visa had long expired. Without legal status, she could not work or go on to her dream of college.

In grim moments, she once again peered into the mirror and wondered what would become of her life.

"I was just tired. You just think that if it works, it works. If it doesn't work, it's not meant to work," she recalled. "When you are already down, you don't fear falling again because it feels like a normal state."

The Human Trafficking Clinic, contacted by Catholic Charities, quickly began exploring legal routes for asylum. But at each turn, it seemed, roadblocks emerged.

First, the law students considered a political asylum request. But that applies only to those fearing persecution in their home countries; the girl's persecution occurred here.

Next, they looked at the Violence Against Women Act, which protects victims of domestic abuse. But that applies only to the spouses, parents or children of U.S. citizens; the girl's abuser was her aunt.

One day, almost in passing, the girl mentioned that her grandmother was pressuring her to return to Mali for an arranged marriage. If she did, she told the students, she would first have to undergo female circumcision - a required ritual in her tribe.

"It was shocking to hear that. To her, it's a part of her culture," said Sulami. "To us, it's a girl our own age going through something awful."

It also made a compelling asylum claim.

The team put all its muscle into building a case around the horrors of female genital mutilation, performed on an estimated 95 percent of Malian women. One of the girl's aunts bled to death following the procedure.

"I didn't want to go through that. It's not right," the girl said. "I just decided to stand and say I'm not going to do it."

The asylum claim, filed in November 2011, asked for relief from "intentional infliction of severe pain and suffering upon her return to Mali."

But after so many dead ends and disappointments, including a dispiriting asylum hearing, the thread of hope was frayed. All the girl and her advocates could do was wait.

Then, in January, she got word from the federal asylum office. Her request had been approved.

"I feel like my God has not forsaken me. It is an unbelievable blessing," the 19-year-old said, as a storm that had unleashed cracks of lightning, furious claps of thunder, and pelting sheets of rain suddenly cleared. The clouds parted and the sun glimmered faintly overhead.

"Even me knowing the clinic students is a kind of blessing. They are amazing people and they have taken me where I want to go, where I want to be."

<http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Malian-girl-s-cry-for-help-reaches-Houston-law-3466569.php>