

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My experience at Freedom House was everything I hoped it would be and more. I chose to work at Freedom House this summer because it is both a homeless shelter and a legal aid for refugees making an affirmative asylum claim. This means that the clients I worked with this summer lived in the house in which I was working. I saw them on my way to get water from the kitchen, when I was making copies, and of course, in the legal office. Having constant client interaction allowed me to get to know the people with whom I worked extremely well, which, though sometimes challenging, definitely helped me in representing them.

Overall, I worked with twelve clients, and saw cases at all stages – from the intake, to application preparation, to interview preparation, and finally, affirmative asylum interviews at the Chicago Homeland Security Office. I spent the majority of my time working directly with clients to prepare their applications, mostly meeting with them individually to write and clarify their declaration. A client's declaration provides the asylum office the story of why and how the client was persecuted. The lawyers would use this declaration to come up with a list of evidence the client is asked to obtain from his or her home country, and once the evidence arrives, the attorneys and I would have it translated and assembled it so the evidence supports the client's declaration.

I spent a lot of my time this summer with one client in particular – let's call him Peter. Because Freedom House's clients may be in the county illegally and/or have active cases in the court systems, confidentiality is very important. Therefore, Peter is not my client's real name.

Peter arrived at Freedom House only a few weeks before I started my internship. He had been a law student in his home country and was starting to teach at his University. Peter was a very involved student and an active member in both University and National politics. He was a leader in his student government and member of the country's largest opposition party. As part of his student government, Peter spoke up against changes the government was forcing the university to make that would hurt students. In his position, Peter was constantly under pressure from the ruling party to lie to students and support the party in power. Party leaders offered Peter bribes and threatened him constantly, but he refused to be silenced.

In 2010, Peter participated in student protests and was arrested and detained in prison for days. Officials interrogated and tortured Peter, telling him he would be killed if he continued supporting the opposition. However, this did not deter Peter's involvement in either student politics or the opposition party. After he was released, he continued to work for the good of the students, and helped with the opposition party's campaign for the 2012 elections. After the 2012 elections, which many believed to be fraudulent, Peter worked with his and other opposition parties to educate the public about democracy and what they deserved from their government. Because of this, the government beat Peter up, arrested him, had other prisoners torture him, interrogated him, tortured him, and almost killed him. The only reason Peter is still alive is because he escaped from his prison guards when they were taking Peter to execute him. He then escaped from his country on a student visa, but his family was forced to sell most of their cattle to pay for his flight and his schooling. He heard about Freedom House through a presentation at the University where he was studying and

took a bus from Virginia to Detroit, Michigan to get help. By the time he arrived at Freedom House, he had no money, had fallen out of status, and was terrified he would be forced to return to his country, where he knew he would be killed.

I met with Peter many times in order to understand his story. He was a native French speaker who had taken English for a few years, so between his English and my French, we were able to meet without a translator. Before meeting with a client, the lawyers have the client write their story in a word document, which the lawyers and I would then review. We then meet with the client and ask him questions about his story, clarify parts, and highlight the elements of the story that qualify him for asylum.

In Peter's case, the first draft of his story was very confusing. Peter had been involved in so many political activities and had so many episodes of persecution, a lot of clarification was necessary to find out what happened and in what order events had occurred. Peter, the attorney and I spent many meetings talking about politics in his country, why he had gotten involved in politics and become so active, and why he stayed active even when he knew his life was in jeopardy. We were also forced to discuss how he was tortured and what officials said while they tortured him. These conversations were very strange because even with both of our language skills, Peter did not know the English words for what had happened to him and I did not understand the French words. For example, in his story, Peter wrote that he had been hung from the ceiling. It took some time to understand that he was hung upside down, with rope attached to his feet, from a hook in the ceiling. Peter's reaction to these conversations was to laugh because of both his and my language difficulties, but it was clear the episodes were difficult for him to talk about. At one point, when we had finished speaking about one of the worst events of torture, I apologized to Peter and said I understood that this must be hard to talk about. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "Yes, but it is something that happened to me – it is a part of me now."

It was hard to keep a professional distance with Peter because he reminded me so much of my friends and myself. He is close to my age, excited about law, and wants to make a change in the world. He is sweet, thoughtful, and very sensitive. It makes me mad and upset when I think about all Peter went through and that he will never be able to go home. Peter is the kind of person who could change his country. If he had been a student in America, he would be headed for greatness. But instead, his country tried to break his spirit and eliminate him. I know Peter is still suffering from trauma, the physical effects of his torture, and the fear that he is here illegally. But he always tried to remain in good spirits, asked me how I was doing, and was happy to talk with everyone.

We filed Peter's application for affirmative asylum the day before my internship ended. Once he receives his receipt, he will have legal status in the United States. Legally, Peter deserves asylum, as do all the residents of Freedom House. I feel honored that I was able to work with Peter and all my other clients, and I know I learned a lot about law and about people this summer.

It is in large part thanks to the grant from Equal Justice America that I was able to work with wonderful clients like Peter, and I am so grateful for the help. It was your generous grant that allowed me to provide legal services to the residents of Freedom House this summer.

Sincerely,  
Kelsey VanOverloop  
University of Michigan Law School, December 2015