

Practicing Immigration Law on September 11

Just as those of us who are old enough remember where we were on the day President Kennedy was shot, all of us today have an indelible memory of where we were on the day of the terrorist attacks. In all the horror and the aftermath, the universal question frequently asked has been, “How can they hate us this much?” My particular memory of September 11 began with an incredible revelation of why “they” hate us, providing me with a different perspective than most Americans as I watched the tapes of the attack played over and over again.

I was with an Immigration Clinic student of mine, Dawn Johnson, a 3L from Shiocton, Wisconsin, on our way to an asylum hearing in Chicago for a client from a Middle Eastern country. We did not have the car radio on, since we needed the time to brief our client on the asylum procedure and to review his claim. As we tried to gather our thoughts, he began to thank us profusely for all that we had done for him. He explained that he had been afraid of Americans and that, when he first came to the United States, he did not leave his apartment for a month, fearful of what “we” might do to him.

Our client is a highly educated man, a member of his country’s foreign service and a practicing Muslim. Yet, since he was a young child, he had been taught about the “evils” of the West. Through grade school, high school, college and graduate school, he had heard and he believed what we now know to be something of a mantra for some Middle Easterners: The West is to blame for all social ills — crime, murder, rape, pornography, homosexuality. Evil things happened to people who had any association with the West.

Our client’s country people were encouraged to resist this evil in any manner they could, even if it meant dying or killing. He recalled for us a time when his 10-year-old sister had made friends with the boy next door, merely talking to him through the fence. When their parents discovered her friendship, her father almost killed her by beating her for not upholding the strictures of the Muslim practice. Our client, too, had suffered indescribable abuse at the hands of his countrymen because of his effeminate nature. He told us that he had never expected, in his wildest dreams, for the United States to be the place it has

been for him, with kind and understanding people everywhere. He reemphasized that he never could have been prepared for what he encountered here, because the rhetoric at home had no place for America’s generosity and good will.

When we arrived in Chicago, I dropped off Dawn and our client at the court. As I pulled the car into the parking garage, cars were streaming

out. Traders were everywhere in the streets and on the plaza, on cell phones and looking at the sky. It was a surreal experience for us, since we had no idea of what had happened. Dawn and the client met me outside the court, having been turned away by the asylum officer with the explanation that downtown Chicago was being evacuated. A woman on the street explained to us what had happened. Dawn and I both thought back to the first World Trade Center bombing, and instantly realized that we may be perceived to have a “enemy” with us in our client. He, on the other hand, was totally oblivious to anti-Mid-Eastern sentiments or to our need to get out of there fast. As he told us, this sort of thing happens in his country every day. He commented that when people go to bed at night in his homeland, they don’t say “good night.” Rather, they say “good-bye,” just in case they don’t live through the night because of bombing.

Then, in a voice loud enough to be heard over the hubbub, he proclaimed, “It could only be [someone else], not Osama bin Laden. I know, because I am in the foreign service of [a Middle Eastern country]!” At that point, I lost it. I told him to be quiet, in no uncertain terms. We then evacuated downtown Chicago with the others who were fleeing.

The enormity of what had happened did not hit our client at first. He had never lived in the security that we had, and he had not realized what this breach of our security meant. Nor did he expect the anti-Arab backlash from Americans — a people who, he had come to learn, had been wrongly demonized back home.

Two months later, our client had his hearing and was granted asylum. He now assists the Quakers in their work with Afghan refugee orphans. He still thanks us profusely for giving him his life. We, in turn, thank him for what he has given us: an understanding of where at least some of that hatred comes from — fear and ignorance.

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