

Attorney Transformed by Stint with ProBAR

By Jill Fleishman

By the time Isabel had reached the age of fourteen, she could no longer endure her life in Guatemala. Her parents abandoned Isabel when she was an infant, and she was severely abused by the aunt and uncle in whose house she lived. When she could no longer bear the abuse, Isabel desperately searched for family or friends who would take her in. Everywhere she went, she was turned away. Finally, when her uncle held a gun to her head and threatened to kill her, Isabel made the hazardous journey from Guatemala through Mexico and across the river into South Texas where she was arrested by the border patrol.

I was immediately drawn to Isabel when I arrived at ProBAR, in Harlingen, Texas, for the first time in the summer of 2001. I came to ProBAR as a result of inquiries at the 2001 American Immigration Lawyer's Association Conference in June of 2001. I went to the AILA conference in the hope of finding opportunities to work pro bono and learn immigration law. Luckily, I found ProBAR.

Everywhere I asked, I heard the name of "ProBAR." I contacted Meredith Linsky, attorney and coordinator of ProBAR, and she invited me to come to Harlingen to help with Isabel's case, which was set for an asylum hearing before the Immigration Judge in July of 2001. I was new to the field of immigration law, and I had not practiced any law for over ten years, but I accepted the invitation. The decision changed my life.

I have made numerous trips to ProBAR since July of 2001. Through the mentoring of Ms. Linsky and the other dedicated and very knowledgeable people at ProBAR, I have worked not only on children's cases, but also on cases of adults who have been locked behind the bars of the Port Isabel Service Processing Center (PISPC) near Harlingen. These individuals—Daniel, Isabel, Ernesto, Eduardo, Marcos, Shahat Mohamed, Petronila, Hector, Carlos—are of varied nationalities, from countries in Central and South America or as distant as Nigeria, Egypt, India, Somalia, or China.

Each person's story is unique, but they all fled the chaos of their native countries and came to the United States for an opportunity to live and work free of persecution. Some of them recently have escaped into the United States and are seeking protection through asylum. Others have lived in the United States for many years—some since they were infants.

The people at ProBAR give these children and adults an opportunity to be represented, an opportunity to tell their stories to someone who will listen and who may be able to assist them through the legal process to earn the right to stay in the United States. The cases are compelling, and the work is immeasurably rewarding.

I experienced learning through "immersion" at ProBAR. I learned about immigration law and the workings of the INS and the Immigration Courts. I was thrown into the work, but Ms. Linsky, as

well as Lisa Villarreal-Rios, the attorney who heads up the children's cases, and Grant Rissler, a Mennonite volunteer paralegal at ProBAR, were always there to guide and inspire me. They were patient as I asked numerous, and probably repeated, questions. Although the work is intensely serious, we also found times to laugh together and become good friends.

I arrived in Harlingen for my second "tour" immediately following the events of 9/11. That and other tragic events of international significance continually remind me how important the understanding of other cultures can be. Working at ProBAR taught me about conditions in many countries and about people from cultures very different from my own.

While I was working in Harlingen, I often thought of the story that many of you have undoubtedly heard of the old man walking along a long stretch of beach. He continually leaned over, picked up one starfish after another, and threw them back into the water. The old man was approached by a younger man who questioned the old man about why he would waste his time throwing the starfish back into the water since there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of beached starfish and the old man's efforts couldn't possibly make any difference. The old man replied that to each one of the starfish he threw back, he certainly made a difference.

The work that is done at ProBAR makes a difference to immigrants to the United States, one after another. But the work also has changed and enriched my own life. I have worked, learned, made good friends, been energized, developed a deeper life perspective, grown more confident, and laughed—a lot. Undoubtedly, I have gained more from my time at ProBAR than I have given.

And Isabel? We were thrilled when we won her asylum case last summer. She is now living with a loving family in New York. She loves school, she loves studying music, and, amazingly, after all the trauma she suffered in her short life before arriving in the United States, she remains a caring, happy young woman with a determined and positive spirit. All indications are that she will be one more in a long, long line of immigrants that has repaid this nation many times over for the chance to escape despair and horror.

I look forward to many more trips to ProBAR in South Texas. Maybe you will join me. ❖

Jill Fleishman is an Ohio attorney and ProBAR volunteer. For more information about ProBAR, contact Meredith Linsky at probartx@worldnet.att.net. ProBAR volunteers are not limited to Texas attorneys. They need only be licensed to practice in any of the 50 states and/or the District of Columbia.