

THE GAVEL GAZETTE

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From Exile to Asylum: A Student Activist's Journey

by CARES Client AZ

Imagine yourself on a tour of Europe. Such milestones as London, Paris, Vienna, Prague and Berlin are already left behind and the next one on your list is Minsk – a city of two million in the heart of Belarus, a former Soviet state which itself lies in the geographical center of the Old World. Now imagine yourself emerging from the depth of the subway and instead of seeing the anticipated cobblestone paved square with fountains and shady alleys you observe this: the entire square is filled with people, there are a few dozen tents set up in the middle, it is night and minus 15 degrees Celsius, and police and special forces are grabbing, one by one, anybody who even tries to approach the camping ground or anybody who is unlucky enough to get close to the police without any backup from within the circle.

NOT A MOVIE, BUT REALITY

It is not a movie, and you're not in 1917. It is a gruesome reality of 21st century Europe. It's March 19, 2006, and the people in the square are protesting against the incumbent dictator-president Alexander Lukashenka's presidential election fraud. And they are not going away until they see justice. Many are already sick; many have been captured by the police. These people are teachers, doctors, drivers and students – normal citizens who are tired of the twelve-year-long tyranny. They just want their lives back; they want to work and travel, to talk freely and watch the news about the new railway station opening in Germany and not another report about Lukashenka winning the first prize in hockey. These people understand that they are all that stands between the future of their loved ones and a European version of Fidel Castro's Cuba.

If I were in Belarus, you would find me among those people in the square. Right now I am in Delaware and all I can do is tell everyone about what is going on and send money to help them pay the hefty fines and get them some hot food and clothes. Some say, it's good enough... I say, it's the fate of any political asylee.

I had to flee Belarus nearly four years ago out of fear for my life. Being a progressively-minded student and having visited quite a few "western" countries, including the U.S., I have always been against the Lukashenka regime. My fellow students and I organized rallies and pickets to protest in any possible, though peaceful, way against the atrocities of the government. And for that we were detained, beaten, excluded from schools, and threatened. With broken hearts and dwindling hope we had to flee to the U.S. and start the long, tedious process of getting asylum. After about three years of struggling alone, I finally found out about the Villanova Clinical Program. This article is a tribute to them - the people who work to help the ones in trouble get their lives back.

I WAS NOT ALONE

On a winter day, in the middle of a school year, I came to the Clinic for Asylum, Refugee and Emigrant Services (CARES) and spoke to Pat Brown. I am so grateful to this person! Even though the clinic was already busy for the year working with other clients, she did not send me away but helped, putting me in the hands of Professor Pistone. Professor Pistone went with me to my preliminary hearing. Only then did I start to feel some relief. I thought, "There are great people backing me up. I am not alone."

The next summer I met law students Emily and John – the perfect lawyers. They interviewed me at length many times, trying to really understand what is happening in my country. They are experts now, but back then Emily and John had to dig through thousands of pages and hundreds of web-sites. They found experts on Belarus, contacted my friends and family, and prepared affidavits. My great lawyers even organized a direct phone call to the American embassy in Minsk, from where my father spoke to the judge through an interpreter. Although this particular judge has a grant rate that could discourage anyone, at the hearing I felt really confident (maybe because I had Emily, John and Professor Pistone with me the whole time). In the end, so much valuable evidence was collected and organized into a fine case that the judge was compelled to grant me asylum.

A STUDENT AGAIN

Truly, it is impossible to overestimate the job that my two lawyers did to win this case. I will just say that I came out of the court being myself again after three years of suspended animation. Now I am a student again. Soon I will be able to travel and see my family, to lead a great life. Isn't that what any person is born for?!

Thank you, Emily, John, Professor Pistone, Pat Brown and Marisa Cianciarulo. Your help has done so much for me and hopefully will eventually be fruitful for my country.

P.S. At 3:30 a.m. on March 24, 2006, after five freezing days and nights of resolved protest, the last standing 500 people were arrested and brutally dragged from the square....

Long live Belarus!!!

