



REFUGEE FROM TORTURE: "DANIEL" STANDS IN A DOORWAY NOT FAR FROM THE BURLINGTON OFFICE WHERE ERIN JACOBSEN '11 BROUGHT HIS CASE INTO THE LIGHT.

CALL

ME

AN IMMIGRANT'S STORY—AND A LAWYER WHO GIVES HOPE.

DANIEL

BY DAVID GOODMAN / PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB BOSSI

THE SLIM MAN PEERING OUT FROM BENEATH A BLACK BASEBALL CAP STARES DIRECTLY AHEAD AS HE TELLS HIS STORY. HE SPEAKS IN A SOFT MONOTONE. WE ARE SITTING AT A TABLE IN A SHOPPING MALL FOOD COURT. THE SETTING IS UTTERLY ORDINARY. THE SUBJECT OF OUR CONVERSATION IS NOT.

I was working in my country's equivalent of the White House, with the president," begins the 41-year-old man. He is from Angola, a southern African country rich in oil but riven by poverty, war, and violence. "I knew a lot."

I ask him how I should refer to him. He smiles faintly. "Call me Daniel," he replies. A salt and pepper goatee frames his face. "I feel that they are here looking for me. So I don't use my real name."

Daniel, like many immigrants, left his home and family to save his life. His experience touches a chord for me: my grandparents were Russian Jews who fled in the 1920s to escape pogroms, finally settling in Brooklyn. Eight years ago, I had a chance to pay forward an old debt by hosting a refugee family of ethnic Turks who were fleeing persecution in Russia and being resettled in the Green Mountain State. I was closing a circle.

Vermont has been a safe haven for some 6,300 refugees who have settled here since 1989. In cities such as Burlington and Winooski, it is now common to meet people from Bosnia, Sudan, Somalia, Bhutan, Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda. These newcomers bring welcome diversity to one of the whitest states in the U.S. And Vermont brings a measure of peace and stability to lives that have been upended.

Vermont is pastoral, but worldly. Daniel was surprised when I told him that I was familiar with the neighborhood where he was from. In 1990, I was on the border of Namibia and Angola covering the wars that raged in southern Africa. I couldn't get into Angola at the time due to a decades-long Cold War conflict that was backed by the U.S., South Africa, Russia, and Cuba. We shared stories about our travels in Namibia.

Angola's war has ended, but repression continues. Human Rights Watch reports that under President José Eduardo Dos Santos, who has ruled the country for three decades, there are "persistent violations of the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly; mass evictions; arbitrary arrests; unlawful killings, sexual violence and torture by the security forces; and impunity for such abuses."

Daniel knows this firsthand. He tells me how several years ago, the Angolan government evicted his family and destroyed his home and neighborhood to clear land for its own construction projects. "They give you metal roofing, and they say go build a shack in the woods," he recounts indignantly. So he did what many would do facing an unjust eviction: he attended a peaceful protest. That was the beginning of his nightmare.

Plainclothes government agents showed up at his home shortly after. They accused him of being a traitor. "I was kidnapped," he says. "I was almost dead. See

this?" He points to a dark spot on his temple. "I got that when they hit me in the head with the butt of a gun. There are spots on other parts of my body, too. They kept beating me."

Daniel suddenly falls silent. "It's so hard," he tells me in a near whisper. The din of shoppers milling in the mall where we are sitting fills the silence.

Daniel managed to flee his captors when the car they were transporting him in got into an accident. Fearing for his life, he dashed into the forest. He had a wife and four children at home. He would not see them again.

Daniel's odyssey ultimately led him to slip into neighboring Namibia, where he bought a plane ticket to the U.S. Once here, he learned that Vermont had a small community of Africans who would welcome him. In November 2011, Daniel arrived in Burlington. A sympathetic refugee family from Congo took him in and brought him to the Association of Africans Living in Vermont, a small, Burlington-based nonprofit founded in 1999, which began providing him with assistance, including helping him apply for legal asylum.

And so began his next journey: making a new home in America.

I find Erin Jacobsen in her new office above a coffee shop, at Vermont Law School's South Royalton Legal Clinic. An unruly spray of blond hair hangs loosely over her face. The 40-year-old attorney who started law school in her mid-30s is quick to laugh—which is impressive, considering the gravity of her daily work.

Jacobsen is a Wyoming native who moved at age twelve with her family to Vermont, where her grandparents lived. She was a free spirit, dropping out of Syracuse University after two years and moving to Colorado to ski and be a sculptor. She moved back to Vermont in her 30s and had two sons. At the time, she was volunteering with a group that worked with incarcerated women. One day, while sitting at a traffic light, she was stopped behind a car with a Vermont Law School parking sticker. As the light changed, another light went off for Jacobsen. "It occurred to me I could go to law school and be more effective on the issues I care about."

Jacobsen enrolled at Vermont Law School, where, in addition to working with women in prison, she did an internship at Vermont Immigration and Asylum Advocates (VIAA), the lone statewide agency set up to serve the legal needs of Vermont's increasing popula-

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tion of detained immigrants and asylum seekers. Upon graduating Vermont Law School in 2011, she became a staff attorney at VIAA.

She worked there until 2014, when VIAA—a tiny operation that had survived on little more than a shoestring for more than a quarter-century—closed its doors due to funding problems. By then, Jacobsen had become personally and professionally invested in her work. She realized that securing asylum for her clients required, for them and her both, a frustratingly long timeline. She decided to maintain her caseload and her focus, but in a new job.

Vermont Law School, meanwhile, had been home to the Vermont Immigrant Assistance Project (VIA) since 2003. Housed within the South Royalton Legal Clinic, the VIA had long provided student and staff assistance to Jacobsen's defunct organization. In a move that somehow seems natural, if not inevitable, Jacobsen became a staff attorney at the legal clinic, an assistant professor at VLS, and director of VIA, which has taken

over many of the cases once handled by Jacobsen's former employer.

"For a relatively recent graduate, she brings a great deal of experience and knowledge in the field of immigration law," observes Jim May, a Vermont Law professor and director of the legal clinic. "She knows virtually everyone in the state who is involved in representing certain low-income immigrants, but also immigrants as a group. She's highly committed, very capable, really good with students, and creative."

The need for immigration lawyers in Vermont is great: in 2013, VIAA assisted 741 individuals from 89 different countries, while the legal clinic's Vermont Immigrant Assistance Project provided legal representation to 115 individuals in the year ending June 2014. Jacobsen travels around the state to meet with immigrant clients who are unable to meet her in South Royalton.

One benefit of moving the immigration work to VLS has been the opportunity for law students to work with Jacobsen on complex immigration cases. Vermont Law

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student Wendy Hoffman, 45, is helping Jacobsen on one such case involving kidnapping, torture, and asylum. Jacobsen, she says, is "very accessible, and I never hesitate to ask her a question." Hoffman is also working with Jacobsen in the clinic's Prison Project, where she will join Jacobsen to assist incarcerated women with family law issues.

Hoffman, who has already enjoyed a career as an opera singer, tells me, "I feel it's my turn to give back to the community that has given me so much, and help people who otherwise can't get help through the system."

Daniel walked into Erin Jacobsen's life in January 2012. He needed asylum, he announced. It was a meeting that would change them both.

"Daniel wasn't in good shape," says Jacobsen. "He was in a lot of distress." But she was busy finishing other cases, so she told Daniel to work on his asylum statement and return in a couple of months, when she could focus on his case. When Daniel returned in March 2012, he had just found out that his daughter had died while his wife was fleeing in Angola. The grieving father

was crying so hard that he could hardly speak.

I ask Jacobsen how she helps someone in such turmoil.

"You just listen," she replies. "I asked if he wanted to talk about what happened with his daughter. He said he didn't know what happened." In his desperation, Daniel had filed his application for asylum by himself. Jacobsen was stunned and dismayed.

"In my lawyer mind I thought, I can't take this case now. Things were filed that I didn't have a hand in and didn't know if I could fix. But how do you say that to someone whose daughter died, and whose only recourse is to get asylum in the U.S.? It's not like he could go back. So I decided I would do my best with it."

A friend and colleague from Vermont Law, Molly Owens JD/MELP'11, agreed to help on his case. "The three of us became a team."

Helping an immigrant torture survivor is more than a legal challenge. First, there was Daniel's fragile mental health. Jacobsen arranged for Daniel to get psychotherapy with New England Survivors of Torture and Trauma (NESTT), a program within the psychology department at the University of Vermont that had worked closely with VIAA and works, now, with VIA. That program is

"a very innovative project that brings our students into collaboration with UVM psychology students and allows for interdisciplinary work," says clinic director Jim May. "That combination has brought relief to a number of people who had awful experiences in the countries that they come from."

Jacobsen got Daniel a bicycle so that he could get around more easily. She helped him obtain a driver's license and enroll in English classes. Most importantly, Jacobsen cared.

"Erin gave me moral support," Daniel tells me. "If someone can talk to you, call you and ask how you are doing, how you are feeling, ask if you have news from your family, how your job is going—this is something bigger than money."

Jacobsen reflects, "It is an honor that people from around the world who don't know me trust me enough to tell me the hardest story they will ever have to tell. Then they trust that I am going to be able to help them by using that story to get a good outcome."

"At the end, they are going to be safer and they are going to have a life here. And it's not just asylum seekers. I do a lot of cases with battered immigrants—people who have left spouses and relatives for their own safety. Those stories are traumatic...and the people trust me. That keeps me going."

I ask Jacobsen if she ever feels like giving up. "The only reason I feel like that is we can't get closure on any of these cases." She explains that hearings for asylum applications have nearly ground to a halt due to federal budget cuts. A process that once took months now drags into three years or longer. "So everyone is in legal limbo," she says.

"If we could just get people interviews, we know there's a good possibility that they would get asylum, they could bring their families here, they could work and get benefits. They're going to be OK. That's what keeps you going. The fact that you can't get them all the way there because the system isn't funded—that's infuriating."

For Daniel, meeting Jacobsen has already given him a new life. An engineer by training, he now works in quality control at Keurig Green Mountain, the coffee company. He has recently begun teaching math at Vermont Adult Learning—the same place he went to learn English, in which he is now remarkably fluent. A semblance of order, stability, and dignity have returned to Daniel's life.

"What gives me hope is knowing that I'm alive and doing something to help out my family," he says. He is now focused on trying to reunite with his family, although he does not know where they are.

"I cannot give up. I don't want to give up. I have to get ready to see them. It is something I want to happen as soon as possible. At that time I have to be able to respond to all their needs, as a father, to take back the time, and give them love."

Daniel's feeling about Jacobsen transcends their professional connection. "She's my family. She's my sister. She helps me to stand up. And now I'm standing up."

I share Daniel's sentiment with Jacobsen. The ebullient legal activist falls uncharacteristically silent. Her large brown eyes become moist. "I didn't know he felt that way," she replies quietly. "I don't think I've done anything extraordinary. I just listen. As a lawyer, you are supposed to keep a boundary. I'm a professional and I'm doing a job. But I've now known Daniel for three years. It would be heartbreaking if he weren't to get asylum here and I knew that he had to return to a situation that would put his life in danger. That's a heavy weight."

"He's the extraordinary person. He just found me."

I sip coffee at Barrister's Book Shop and Café downstairs from the South Royalton Legal Clinic, peering at the goings-on outside. A large logging truck swings past, and kids kick a soccer ball beneath brilliant orange foliage on the town green.

Suddenly, it feels as if a powerful gust of wind hits the building. The door bursts open and Erin Jacobsen charges through.

"My client wants a hot cocoa," she says breathlessly to the barista. She's in a hurry, but she comes over to say hi. She tells me she's just commandeered a law student from France to interpret for her. "I know—an immigration attorney, and I don't speak any other languages. But that's OK. Now we get others to help and be involved."

In rapid-fire cadence, Jacobsen shares a few details about the case. "She's a young woman from Africa who's experienced female genital mutilation. She ran away from a forced marriage. Oh, and she just told me that she's a lesbian. The least I can do is get her hot cocoa."

Jacobsen flashes a smile, and charges out of the coffee shop, hair swinging as she bolts around the corner. She's off to help another client who has traveled to this small corner of the world to rekindle hope.

Journalist David Goodman is a contributing writer for Mother Jones. Author or co-author of nine books, he has reported from Sudan, Liberia, and elsewhere in Africa on war, AIDS, and the plight of women and children.