

Heroes in Any Language

By Carolyn M. Welshhans

Many things have been written about Guantánamo. People have written about the legal, ethical, medical, psychological, and religious implications of that horrible prison. Writers have discussed the numerous, astounding and outlandish ways our government turned its back on justice. There have been many editorials, articles, and even books about these issues. Some of these publications have included some very important writings about individual prisoners, helping to provide a much-needed connection to the hundreds of human beings imprisoned at Guantánamo. There is one topic I have not seen much attention paid to, however, and that is the interpreters. The vast majority of prisoners at Guantánamo do not speak English. They speak Pashto, Dari, Russian, Farsi, Arabic, and other languages. Therefore, in order to communicate with clients, lawyers must bring interpreters with them to Guantánamo.

These interpreters are nothing short of courageous. They made individual decisions to reach out and get involved in the Guantánamo litigation. These brave men and women realized that they could not stand by silently while fellow human beings suffered, and so they offered an incredible gift: their voices. They submitted themselves to thorough background checks in order to obtain the necessary security clearances to travel to Guantánamo. They asked employers for permission to take off work, days at a time, for trips to Guantánamo. They explained to loved ones, including small children, why they would be away from home. In fact, because there is such a shortage of security-cleared interpreters, they devote even more time to the Guantánamo trips than the attorneys. Many of these individuals volunteered before much was even known about Guantánamo and the prisoners being kept there. The interpreters did not know how their neighbors or the country as a whole would react to the idea of Guantánamo prisoners challenging their

indefinite detentions. Many of the interpreters are first or second generation immigrants, and they face possible discrimination within their new country if they are accused of being “soft on terrorism.” The interpreters are the true example of standing up and doing what is right, even if the personal and professional risks are great.

The interpreters do much more than merely translate words from one person to another. They also have to explain legal concepts to clients completely unfamiliar with the American judicial and political systems, and they must navigate cultural differences. In addition to all of this work, the interpreters serve as psychologists, advisors, and, perhaps most importantly, surrogate family members. Clients’ faces light up when they see an interpreter they have come to regard as a trusted friend. It is a visible relief to them to be able to talk to someone in their own language who understands a little something about their customs, their home, and their old way of life. While the interpreters get to share in these moments of happiness, they are all too fleeting. Clients miss their families desperately and seeing the interpreters reminds them that they have been separated for years from daughters, wives, brothers, and fathers.

Sometimes, clients rail at the injustice of their situation. There is little to say other than to agree with them. But the lawyers are one step removed, and it is the interpreters who hear the emotions first-hand. If it is that hard for me to hear, I cannot imagine the emotional burden that the interpreters carry. Yet, I have never heard one of them ever complain. I only hope they realize just how much they have helped the prisoners at Guantánamo. Without the interpreters, the prisoners would not have clung to the thin hope that one day this will all be over.

The interpreters remind me that there are still people in our country who rise to the occasion when events provide us with great challenges. It is amazing that the prisoners at

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Guantánamo do not profess hatred for the United States after all that our country has done to them. That result is in large part due to the humanity and hard work of the interpreters. Our country owes them for being exemplary Americans, and I thank all of them from the bottom of my heart.