

NEWS ARTICLE

**Pro Bono Efforts Help Burmese Refugee Win Political Asylum in U.S.**

January 21, 2011

Turn "Rose" Hlei-Sung survived torment in her native country of Burma that few people could imagine, much less endure. Now, thanks to the *pro bono* effort of a team of Womble Carlyle attorneys, Rose can build a new life for herself in South Carolina.

Practicing Christians of Chin ethnicity, Rose and her family are doubly-persecuted in the predominantly Buddhist nation where the oppressive military dictatorship and ruling government have been brutal toward ethnic and religious minorities for the last five decades. Since the military regime took control in 1962, human rights organizations estimate that two million refugees have fled Burma to neighboring Thailand.

At the age of 17, Rose was arrested for teaching a Christian Sunday school class. When police demanded that she renounce her beliefs, build a Buddhist temple, and teach Buddhism instead, she refused and was kidnapped and tortured.

After members of her church successfully bribed law enforcement officers to release her, the girl was so badly injured that she was bedridden for two months recuperating. Remarkably, she went back to teaching, and was abducted again, along with her brother. This time, she escaped from authorities, although she fears her brother was killed. Rose then made her way from Burma to Thailand to Mexico. From there, a contact in the United States attempted to bring her to Charleston, S.C., and she was taken into custody by the Department of Homeland Security.

At this point, the Womble Carlyle team of *Pro Bono* Director [Tripp Greason](#) and litigators [Jamie Dean](#), [Jennifer Lyday](#) and [Whitney Passmore](#) got involved and agreed to help Rose apply for political asylum in the U.S.

In order to gain asylum, a refugee must show that he or she was persecuted for reasons of religion, race or group affiliation, and that returning to his or her homeland would put the refugee in danger of future persecution. This was the case Dean, Lyday and Passmore built for the U.S. Bureau of Immigration.

The *pro bono* team also faced a language barrier. Rose speaks a Chin dialect spoken by fewer than 200,000 people in the world. Asylum seekers are required to provide their own translator for their initial hearing, and the prospect of finding one for Rose seemed daunting, or even impossible.

The team used Google and the popular social media site Facebook to find a university professor in California who grew up in the same region of Burma and who happened to speak the same Chin dialect. Greason contacted the professor, who readily agreed to come cross-country to the hearing and interpret.

The Womble Carlyle team assembled seven affidavits in support of Rose's case. They also obtained testimony from forensic psychiatrists at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine that the girl suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome as a result of being tortured. [Sandy Miller](#), a health care litigator in Womble Carlyle's Greenville, S.C., office, provided the contact for the School of Medicine's testimony, which was a key factor in this case.


In September 2010, Rose, now 18, received a letter from the Bureau of Immigration stating that she had been granted asylum. Now, with help from friends in the U.S., she is starting a new life in Charleston, free from the oppression, torture, and possible death that awaited her in her home country.

"Getting that letter was an outstanding feeling for us as well," Dean said. "Getting asylum literally saved Rose's life, and we are proud to have played a role in helping her."

Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice has donated *pro bono* services on several of the National Center for Refugee and Immigrant Children's cases over the past five years. The firm has always handled the cases with dedication and diligence," said Sara McDowell, Senior Immigration Attorney with the [National Center for Refugees and Immigrants](#).

"As a result, we were very pleased when the team of Womble attorneys agreed to take on Rose's case in 2009, as she was in urgent need of skilled legal representation," McDowell said. "The Womble team handled Rose's case with the efficiency, determination, and commitment that Rose so desperately needed. It was a pleasure to work with the Womble team throughout the course of the case, and we are thrilled by their successful outcome. These attorneys have truly made a difference in Rose's life."

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