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Free at last: When you are among those few granted asylum



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This story has a good ending—or, I should say, a promising beginning.

I just bought my ticket to Minneapolis to go visit Robel* whom I first met last October while doing visitations at Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin, Georgia. Originally from the Horn of Africa,* Robel (not his real name) had been detained since November 2016; he was apprehended by ICE at the Texas border while seeking asylum. After passing a credible fear screening, Robel was taken to Stewart, one of the largest facilities in the country with a 2,000 capacity.



At Stewart, four immigration judges heard around **4,522 cases** in 2016, only **7 percent** of which were granted asylum—the national average for the year was **43 percent**. The judge in front of Robel had a **97.7 percent denial rate**; in fact, he had denied Robel asylum before.

But the Board of Immigration Appeals recently found Robel “entitled to the presumption of a well-founded fear of future persecution” in his home country. Yet, as of earlier last week, Robel remained at Stewart and was a perfect example of “a deeply dehumanizing system (...) [that] threatens to return [individuals] to countries where they will face persecution,” as described in **Punishing Refugees and Migrants**. In March, Human Rights First challenged such exploitative system in a **federal lawsuit**.

In January, Yulio Castro Garrido, 33, Cuban, **died** at a hospital after having contracted pneumonia while detained at Stewart. In May 2017, Jean Carlos Jiménez-Joseph, 27, Panamanian, **hanged himself**. He had been in isolation for 19 days—volunteers from **El Refugio** were not allowed to visit him shortly before his death.

Since 2003, the year I moved to the United States from Italy on a student visa, there have been **179 deaths** in American detention centers. More than often, they are the result of late interventions or lack of medical care.

While detained at Stewart, Robel broke his wrist while playing soccer, eventually went through surgery, learned to speak pretty good English, made friends, and worked for pennies as a cook in the kitchen; more than anything, though, he kept faith and never stopped sporting his contagious smile. This is how he got Lisa and I to attend his court hearing and several other volunteers from El Refugio to write him regularly after meeting him during visitations.

From his new court hearing, Robel didn't know what to expect: his brother, Medhane,* had gotten him a new attorney; he had legal representation, unlike 55 percent of the asylum seekers **that judge** heard between 2012 and 2017.

According to **Shadow Prisons**, a report by the Southern Poverty Law Center, a bias against pro se asylum seekers have been **found**, which points to “systematic due process violations in the Stewart Immigration Court.” Attorney General Jeff Sessions's interventionism on matters of **asylum adjudication** is allegedly meant to make cases move quicker and reduce immigration court backlog. Regardless, it must have been Robel's lucky day.

“I want you to please translate this also for your client,” the judge said to the interpreter on speakerphone. “Welcome to the United States of America!” finally looking in Robel's direction and acknowledging his presence in court for the first time.

He exulted, and so did we. Overwhelmed with joy and surprise, tears kept falling down on our cheeks. We were escorted out, without the possibility of making any contact with our new friend. We walked along the barbed wire fence to the detention center, in the room where we had first met him and where detainees visit for one hour per week with family or friends—or complete strangers like we once were to Robel. As always, there was a glass between us, and we talked using a crackling phone.

I heard again from Robel the day after around 7 pm, a few minutes after I spoke on the phone with his older brother, Medhane, for the first time.

“I'll call you from outside... I'm getting changed.” Robel told me.

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He sounded rushed and excited, perhaps a bit frightened.

I worried.

I began compulsory texting Lisa and Medhane. We received no news for the next couple of hours. My mind was rushing. I grew nervous.

Then, somehow, I missed two calls: one from Lisa and one from Robel. Yes, "he's at the bus station with an ICE agent," Lisa said. "He's on his way to Atlanta, he'll spend the night with a former Stewart detainee." "I'm okay," Robel said. He's fine. He will be fine.

The day after, Medhane picked him up in Atlanta. The two brothers were finally reunited.

I can't wait to visit Robel in Minneapolis. I can now see his radiant smile through Face Time. But I will finally get to hug him. I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship, and I surely wish Robel a great ride.

**Real names and other identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the subjects*

Article by Silvia Giagnoni, PhD, who is an associate professor at Auburn University at Montgomery. She is the author of *Here We May Rest: Alabama Immigrants in the Age of HB56* (NewSouth Press 2017) and *Fields of Resistance. The Struggle of Florida Farmworkers for Justice* (Haymarket Books 2011).

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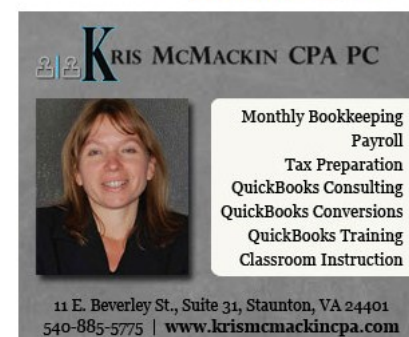
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