

Stories from West Coast Mennonite Central Committee (2007)

Story 1: The “Refugee”

In 1998 his house was looted and burned during the political riots in Indonesia. Out of fear for his own personal safety he sought entrance to the United States on a tourist visa and, once here, began the process of seeking asylum. The process was difficult and confusing; even after seeking information from text books, the Internet, and other people, he often found himself unsure of how to continue. “I need trusted information to continue life in the United States” he explains. “I just need information of what I should do next.”

A strong faith in God was able to sustain him through his traumatic experiences in his home country and his struggle for asylum in the U.S. Through that faith, he was able to see the hand of God working in his life and while here in the United States he met the woman that would become his wife—another refugee—and began learning about the process of petitioning for her residency. He has also used his experiences with the U.S. legal system to help others who are fleeing persecution in their home countries and seeking asylum status in the United States.

His good fortune lay in receiving the necessary information needed to pursue asylum. Others are not so lucky. Those who flee their countries due to a legitimate fear of persecution often enter the United States on tourist visas, but then overstay those visas because they are unaware that they are even eligible for protected status. Laws that criminalize visa over-stays and deny such people future relief will mean that many people who deserve asylum may not receive it.

Story 2: The “Illegal Alien”

“I just want a better life for my family,” said a fifty-year old husband and father from Indonesia. During his first visit to the United States in 1991 he immediately recognized the vast economic and educational opportunities the U.S. had to offer for himself and his children. At that time he applied for and was granted legal residency, including a work permit. As a legal, taxpaying resident, he and his family were able to live here and enjoyed a great deal of mobility between the United States and Indonesia.

That ended in 1996 when the political climate of Indonesia changed drastically. Fueled by underlying social unrest due to extreme poverty and joblessness, animosity was quickly focused on the ethnic Chinese population who were subsequently targeted with extreme violence. Living in Indonesia during this time of unrest, the family felt that they were not safe and returned to the U.S. News of the violent Jakarta riots in May of 1998 only deepened their fear of returning and led them to apply for asylum in the United States. Because of their previous legal status and long term residency they did not anticipate problems.

Unfortunately, their petition was denied. The court ruled that the family was unable to prove a well-founded fear of persecution should they return to Indonesia. For over eight years, they repeatedly appealed the court’s decision and during that time, fell out of status. Now labeled “illegal aliens” he and his family are torn between staying in the United States illegally or returning to a country made extremely dangerous by political upheaval. His wife’s hope for gaining asylum fell so low that she felt the only way for herself and her children to escape deportation would be to marry a U.S. citizen, and she nearly left him.

All he wanted was to provide a better life for his family. Now he is faced with the decision to stay with them illegally or go back to Indonesia and never see them again. Despite trying to follow the proper procedures and “play by the rules” he has been unable to secure the refuge he and his family desperately need. If he hadn’t applied for asylum, he would still be eligible to work as a legal alien. As a long term legal resident he believes he has done nothing wrong and yet he faces harsh consequences for making a request that he had every reason to believe would be granted.