



The Dilley Pro Bono Project

By Chris Hart



Dilley, Texas, is 80 miles southwest of San Antonio and houses a few ranches, a Burger King, a men's prison and an immigrant family detention center called the South Texas Family Residential Center (STFRC). STFRC is the largest family detention center in the country; it houses women and children, mostly from the Central American "northern triangle" (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador), who have largely fled horrific gang violence or domestic abuse. Foley Hoag sponsored my one-week volunteer trip at STFRC during the first week in July, which I became keenly interested in

after reading about the crisis of immigrant children being separated from their parents upon crossing the border, indefinitely, as part of an immigration deterrence strategy. I volunteered with the Dilley Pro Bono Project, which is a partner in the American Immigration Lawyers' Association Immigration Justice Campaign. You can read more about it [here](#).

My work, along with the work of the full-time staff and over 30 volunteers who staffed the project during my week of volunteering, consisted of preparing our clients – women and sometimes children – for their Credible Fear or Reasonable Fear Interviews (CFI or RFI). For those of you unfamiliar with asylum law, as I was before volunteering, under federal law, before an asylum seeker can file an asylum application and appear before an Immigration Judge, she must first pass through a screening interview and present "Credible Fear" (up until now a relatively low bar available to first-time immigrants) or "Reasonable Fear" (a much higher bar required of those who have previously crossed into the United States and have been subject to a deportation order). There are various nuances I am leaving out, of course. An Asylum Officer (AO) ultimately makes the determination. I would also often accompany clients to their interviews with the assigned AO and advocate for them during the interview.

During my week in Dilley, I prepared or accompanied about two dozen women and children for their interviews. Interview preparation consisted of spending anywhere from one to six hours trying to understand a client's story and help her tell that story in a way that fit the credible or reasonable fear requirements. All of the interview preparation was in Spanish (save for some immigrants who speak an indigenous language as their native tongue). All of the preparations were emotionally difficult for our clients: often, it was the first time they would tell their stories.

Their stories were horrific and heartbreaking, as anyone who has done asylum law can attest to. After preparing the first few clients, stories began to fit familiar patterns: families had already seen loved ones killed because of defiance to gang members that have effectively supplanted the state's police authority, and they and their children now lived under death threats; years of domestic violence escalating into mortal danger; the inability to go to the

police for any kind of assistance; the inability to escape to another part of the country – and all of this coupled with often severe poverty and an inability to find any kind of employment. These women and children had faced the worst kind of hardship on their journey, as well, often being subjected to harm or abuse on their way to the United States. And then, finally, many had been prevented from crossing through a port of entry, or had had family members separated from them at the border. The amount of bravery and perseverance is palpable and inspiring.

Advocating for clients before an AO is also an important task, but unfortunately as I observed can be a challenging and frustrating experience. Some AOs are very accommodating to attorney representation and advocacy, allowing for translation corrections, advice to clients during the interviews, and the submission of closing statements or direct questions. Others are hostile. During the week that I was there, asylum law at the screening stage was beginning to change, with the Administration promulgating guidance making asylum claims based on gang and domestic violence nearly impossible to proceed. In addition, the reunification issue at the time seemed intractable, with simply the ability to obtain information about the whereabouts of family members nearly impossible.

The work that the full time staff at Dilley does is remarkable. Staff and volunteer days are intense, often 15 or more hours long. Twice per week the full coterie of staff and volunteers are invited to speak as a group and share with each other about their experiences. And because of the separation and reunification crisis, the Dilley Pro Bono Project had never seen so many volunteers – they have had such an outpouring of support that they are booked with volunteers for the rest of 2018.

There is much more to say about this experience. I am grateful to the firm for supporting this pro bono effort; I am grateful to have had the opportunity to help these incredibly courageous women and their children to the extent I could; and I am grateful to now have the ability to move forward with some amount of knowledge and experience to continue with asylum work here in Boston.