

2013 Pro Bono Institute Annual Dinner – November 7

Remarks from Crispin Ilombe, Alston & Bird Pro Bono Client

I am Crispin Ilombe, a former Congolese catholic priest. My journey to this podium was a long one. My story has a happy ending because of help I received from Alston & Bird attorneys, and I'd like to share that story with you today.

In 2009, I earned a master's degree in Moral Theology at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley in California. My thesis addressed the concept HIV/AIDS prevention as a basic human right in the Democratic Republic of Congo, my home country. Conducting research in this area opened my eyes to human rights and liberation theology. After graduation, I was assigned a job as pastor in a very poor parish in a suburb of Kinshasa. There I was a daily witness to the dire situations of my parishioners. They suffered dearly at the hands of destitution and extreme poverty and lacked basic human comforts such as food, medication, water, and safe roads. I struggled with my duty as a pastor because I could not see how to make good news good in the midst of suffering.

The corrupt government had no concern for the poor people of Kinshasa and continuously spent money lavishly on houses and vehicles. Their lack of care for those that they governed incensed me and I found it terribly difficult to keep quiet in the face of such blatant injustice.

I began to speak out against the government, denouncing their attitude in my homilies, or sermons. Congolese authorities were informed about the content of my homilies and as a result, I was arrested three times. During the course of these arrests I was tortured and beaten. Both in and out of jail, my life was regularly threatened. My mother was beaten to the point of injury and both my cousin and my sister were raped. Finally a friend of mine who was the member of the police asked me to leave Kinshasa and go as far away as I could. He informed me that authorities were planning to kill me. The same night I made the decision to flee Kinshasa; soldiers went to the rectory to look for me.

Without knowing exactly where I was going, I found myself two weeks later in a small village called Kasongo-Lunda. There I met a young woman, Ms. Rose, who graciously took me in. I spent months with her, we fell in love and I was obliged to leave the priesthood. But somehow the government found me and I was arrested in Kasongo-Lunda on May 17, 2011. The soldiers that took me in were planning to transfer me to Kinshasa but were delayed due to bad road conditions and a lack of working vehicles. During the delay, Rose was able to negotiate my escape from prison.

After being in prison for two months, Rose bribed my prison guards with five hundred dollars. They allowed me to escape during the night and Rose and I set out on foot, heading south to a village called Kingete. It was a very difficult journey. At one point, however, I was able to access my e-mail and I contacted my friends in California who sent me an invitation to come to the U.S.

With that letter, I was able to schedule a visa interview appointment on September 6, 2011. The interview was to be conducted in Kinshasa so to avoid being

discovered and detained at any of the multiple roadside checkpoints; I was forced to disguise myself. I was terrified that I'd be discovered and the travel was very slow. Somehow, my interview went well and I was granted a visa. I remained hidden with Rose at her cousin's house in a suburb of Kinshasa. I finally left Kinshasa on September 12, 2011.

I was welcomed by my friends at the San Francisco airport and was housed at Saint David's of Wales Parish in Richmond, Calif. for one month. After that, I accepted the hospitality of a childhood friend living in Atlanta who agreed to take me in. I arrived in Atlanta on Saturday October 15, 2011. Once there, I was able to contact the Georgia Asylum and Immigration Network which helped me find five pro bono attorneys to assist me in seeking asylum so that I could stay in the U.S.

Five attorneys from Alston & Bird accepted my pro bono case. From December 2011 to May 2012, I was working with my legal team to prepare my I-589 Application for Asylum and Withholding of Removal. During that time, I drafted a Declaration, I requested letters of support from my friends and family who attested to the dangers we faced in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and worked with experts who attested to the conditions in the Congo and the life-threatening danger I would face if the U.S. sent me home.

My application for asylum was filed on May 2 and I had my interview on August 2, 2012. Only eight days later on August 10, my application was approved by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. I have to confess that I am who I am today because of the wonderful work of my attorneys.

Today, I am excited for this opportunity to express my gratitude to my dream team and to thank Alston & Bird for their commitment to helping people like me. I wish all the best to Alston & Bird and hope my pro bono attorneys achieve even greater success in the future.