

Sheppard Mullin aids Afghans resettling in the US

By Douglas Saunders

Daily Journal Staff Writer

A team of lawyers from Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton in San Diego has been working with Casa Cornelia Law Center since the fall of Kabul, helping Afghan refugees escaping the atrocities committed at the hands of the Taliban gain asylum in the United States.

Partner Elizabeth Balfour recounts how the firm found itself involved in this pro bono mission to assist so many people in gaining their freedom after they escaped a war-torn country, leaving behind everything they've known to seek refuge in a foreign land.

"I have been at Sheppard Mullin for 22 years, and during most of that time, there have been at least a few asylum cases handled by our San Diego and Del Mar offices," Balfour said. "Then I got a call from Carmen Chavez, the executive director of Casa Cornelia, following the fall of Kabul after U.S. troops pulled out, and the Taliban regained control and began retaliating against anyone who assisted U.S. interests in the region."

Casa Cornelia Law Center is a nonprofit legal services provider that assists victims of persecution in their home countries who flee and come to the United States seeking asylum.

"Their staff attorneys assist those individuals who pursue asylum, but in the majority of

cases, they partner with law firms who supply attorneys to do the asylum work on a pro bono basis for these clients, and Sheppard Mullin has been a longtime partner with them," she continued.

Balfour explained that a large number of those asylum seekers ended up landing at various military bases across the nation, but a significant number found themselves in San Diego.

"We assembled over 50 lawyers to take part in one way or another, and the logistics of the entire program has actually run very smoothly," Balfour said.

Chavez said many of those evacuated had supported or assisted the Allied Forces and were in grave danger for their lives, and a true urgent humanitarian crisis was unfolding right in front of them.

"Knowing we could not accomplish the representation of the number of asylum seekers before us, we turned to Sheppard Mullin, and they answered our call passionately," she said. "Sheppard Mullin attorneys were willing and ready, and we are forever grateful to the firm's leadership and many law firm attorneys and staff for supporting our efforts. They did so without hesitation and with an agility that only comes with experience, willingness, and passion for access to justice"

One attorney on the team, associate Matthew Rebelo, is an immigrant from South Africa. Like most immigrants, Rebelo had to start over completely and said he felt compelled to

help these refugees, who, like him, are having to learn an entirely new way of life, language, culture, and business, many times with no connections.

Recently, Rebelo was able to obtain asylum for two Afghan women, a mother and her young daughter, whose family risked their lives to assist America's interests in Afghanistan.

"The Taliban arrived at their home shortly after Kabul fell because her husband's family had previously been employed by a contractor that had worked with the U.S. military in Afghanistan," Rebelo said. "They separated the men from the women in the home, and while they were assaulting and threatening the men, she grabbed her daughter, jumped out of a window, and ran away. She made her way to the airport, was put on a U.S. Army plane, and was flown out of Afghanistan. Her husband is still in Afghanistan."

Rebelo added, "Here she and her daughter are learning how to live new lives, looking forward to the day her husband will join her."

Balfour explained that the asylum seekers are people involved in a special Homeland Security program called Operation Allies Welcome. These people were vetted and came here with the permission and knowledge of the U.S. Government.

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