

Newsday

Have Degree, Will Travel

By Jimmy Breslin
New York Newsday
December 18, 2003

First yesterday, I meet a bodega owner in Corona who said he had a cousin, Wadah, who is from the West Bank and is something in the Al-Jazeera network. Bendek said that the cousin was willing to give him the audio rights to the torture of Saddam Hussein.

“You can hear him scream while you drive your car,” Bendek said.

“How do you make money with it?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Do you?”

“No.”

“My cousin says he will have a microphone there so you can hear when they do something to Saddam. I just don’t know what to do with it.”

I left him certain of one thing. If he gets that audio out there on the air, his prime listener, George Bush, will be sitting in the White House with the radio on loud.

Later, as I am walking along Queens Boulevard at noon, I run into Natalie Rea, an old friend. She is a pretty 41-year-old widow who stands against state violence wherever she can. I asked her, being that she was in Rwanda and then Afghanistan as a lawyer, if she would work on the Saddam Hussein defense team.

“You’re the second person who has asked me that,” she said.

The first was the bartender at Jerry’s in SoHo when she was having pizza and wine at the bar and the bartender said, “What about being the lawyer for Saddam?”

It would be nothing for her to go over there with a cause in her eyes. She figures to be over there sometime. “Iraq is hard because you’re an American,” she said.

“How many don’t like Americans?” she was asked.

The lawyer with Natalie, Mary Ross, said, “All.”

“That makes it harder to be a defense lawyer,” Natalie said. “In Afghanistan, I wore a scarf. I shouldn’t have given in, but it was hard enough to be defending somebody in a country that has no idea of what a defense lawyer was. There were only three in the country. Why put a second burden on the client with the defense lawyer a woman going around uncovered?”

I met Natalie when she was out of the University of Pittsburgh and became a dentist and opened an office at 93rd and Columbus on the West Side. She had a 350-pound woman who had been a man until some weeks before. The patient had bad teeth and a worse temper and that was the end of dentistry for Natalie.

She went to Fordham Law School and wasn’t out and certified for more than a few weeks when she saw a notice for lawyers to work in Rwanda for the wrong side. They needed lawyers who could speak French. Natalie was raised in France and had her early education there. She was off to Rwanda.

Her clients were these extremely short Hutu women who were obsessed with the taller Tutsi women. To even it up, the Hutus cut the legs off the Tutsi women. That was great. Now every woman was short. Natalie represented the leg-cutters. Her first instinct was to plea bargain. No matter what, escape the max.

The women refused to plead. So did the men. They said that after pleading not guilty, if they changed their plea to guilty in order to get a lesser sentence, their community would say that they were liars and embarrassing their community.

In Afghanistan, she said, a client was offered 100 lashes or 7 years in prison. He was an unmarried young man whose crime was having sex with a young woman who also wasn’t married. The client wanted the lashes. Natalie was sick. Then an old Afghani, who understood the system, told her, “Let him have it. Don’t worry.” It turned out the lashes were merely brushes against his back and he was sent home. The lashes were a symbol.

There will be none of this with Saddam. They want to kill him in Iraq. They want to kill him at the Hague. They want to kill him in the newspaper offices.

Natalie says she would go over there in a flash to work on his defense. Does he have a defense?

“I don’t know. I know he should have a defense lawyer.”

Yesterday, she had to be more concerned with funding for the International Legal Foundation, which sends volunteer lawyers to Afghanistan and Pakistan and hopes to raise funds for lawyers in Sierra Leone.

She works out of the Queens Legal Aid office, but her foundation is based in her breathtaking loft on Prince Street in SoHo. All funding now comes from the Soros Foundation, which does much more social work than anyone imagines. The International Legal Foundation gets young volunteers - Natalie says a volunteer is far better than a paid contract lawyer - who go into these countries far off and ask the first questions ever about illegally detained citizens.

A warden in Afghanistan told a young defense lawyer that 98 percent of the people in his custody were detained with no proper cause - except payment to arresting officers, which they didn't have - but he didn't know what to do about it.

Natalie has a personal emotion about terrorism. On 9/11, Natalie was in the basement of One World Trade Center, coming up from the subway and into this great noise overhead and she and everybody else looked up to see the first plane flying low and into the building. She thought it was an accident and ran for her office on Church Street. She never got there. The second plane hit. She ran home.

Now she is in and out of Afghanistan on rotation and says that the result of the American invasion of Iraq is that the Taliban are returning.

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“They stop cars on the road between Kandahar and Kabul, and if people are listening to the radio, they cut their ears off.”