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ICLS VOLUNTEER ATTORNEY WINS ASYLUM CASE

[Riverside, CA, February 03, 2020] – Inland Counties Legal Services, Inc. (“ICLS”) is excited to announce and congratulate **Sumangala Bhattacharya, J.D., Ph.D.** for winning her first case as a volunteer attorney at ICLS! Sumangala is a private attorney on sabbatical from her position as a Professor at Pitzer College. Sumangala initially came to ICLS as a volunteer, because she wanted to gain experience as an attorney in immigration law and help domestic violence survivors fleeing persecution in their home countries.

Sumangala took on the case in November of 2019, at a point when the client (“Lydia”) had already been navigating the federal immigration court system in Los Angeles since entering the U.S. in September of 2018 with her two children. Due to financial hardship, Lydia had been unable to obtain an attorney earlier in the process. By the time ICLS became involved in the case, the client was already placed in an expedited family unit (“FAMU”) docket, with a final hearing date scheduled for December 2, 2019. Sumangala stepped in to represent Lydia on a pro bono basis and convinced the court to postpone the hearing date for a few weeks, then quickly worked to prepare for Lydia’s trial.

As a result of Sumangala’s representation, Lydia is now able to get a work permit, which will lead to financial independence. In a year, she and her children will be eligible to apply for permanent residency.

“We appreciate the time and dedication Sumangala has given to this case. Without her, we do not know how the case would have turned out for Lydia.” said Tori Praul-Hedrick, Esq., Deputy Director of Community Engagement at ICLS. “ICLS volunteers are essential to our mission of helping the thousands of low-income, disabled, and senior members of the Inland Empire who are desperate for legal assistance but cannot afford to pay an attorney.”

Lydia’s case is not uncommon for those seeking asylum. After a difficult childhood in rural Guatemala, Lydia experienced eight years of brutal beatings and abuse from her partner before she eventually fled to the United States. It started when her partner learned of her Mayan ethnicity. Lydia was seven months pregnant with their first child when her partner beat her so severely she was afraid she would lose the child. The beatings and verbal abuse became a regular occurrence.

After suffering years of abuse, Lydia told her partner to leave her home. The next day, her partner returned and threatened her life with a cattle prod held to her heart. About two weeks later, he lured her to his mother's home, where he brutally beat her with a tire iron and whatever else he could lay his hands on. He held her there against her will for three days. He brought the children back from school and told her that if she tried to leave, she would never see them again.

Lydia tried desperately to get the Guatemalan police to help her. She managed to get hold of a phone and texted a message to her sister, with pictures of her injuries. The police told her sister they could not get involved in a "domestic dispute." After Lydia's partner let her go, she went to the police.

The Guatemalan police did not press charges against her partner and Lydia continued to fight for justice by filing four restraining orders (she was granted two). The whole process took over a year. While Lydia's partner was in prison for armed robbery, he began making harassing phone calls to her from prison. He threatened to torture and kill her as soon as he was out.

Realizing there was no safety for her in Guatemala, Lydia fled for the United States with the hope of obtaining asylum. Sumangala argued that Lydia was eligible for asylum because the domestic violence occurred after her partner learned of her indigenous ethnicity.

Now, Lydia can plan for her family's future in the U.S. She looks forward to becoming fluent in English and showing her children that they can do anything they set their minds to. She is most thankful for her freedom and the peace she has, knowing that she and her children no longer live in fear.

Tanawa Lebreton, Esq., Immigration Practice Group Director, expressed her admiration and gratitude, stating, "With full support from the ICLS immigration team, we expected nothing less from Sumangala. She took on an advanced case for any attorney and came out triumphant in her first trial. We look forward to a continued partnership with Sumangala and appreciate her time and dedication to Lydia."

If you would like to help someone like Lydia, contact Tori Praul-Hedrick at 951-774-4402; tpraul@icls.org. Inland Counties Legal Services, Inc. is a nonprofit organization providing free legal services to low-income persons residing in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. For more information about this topic or if you are interested in volunteering with ICLS, please contact Gabriela Perez at 951-774-4407; gperez@icls.org.