

Mona Mahmoud

In the autumn of 2015, while hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria and other countries were making perilous journeys to and through Europe, a journey was started to secure safe passage to the UK for refugee children stranded in Europe. In theory, the route to the UK was legally open to them if they had adult family members in the UK. In practice, thousands of children were stranded in Calais, Dunkirk, Lesvos, Italy and other parts of Europe with no knowledge of a way forward. The legal campaign aimed to bring the cases of a few before a UK tribunal thereby unlocking and opening up the processes that were closed to thousands of others across Europe. The story of that litigation has been told, but a lesser-known story is that of the hundreds of volunteer interpreters without whom none of this could have happened. Mona Mahmoud was a crucial part of that story.

Our first clients were teenagers in Calais, who were determined to reach their families in the UK, but who had learned from their long journey to avoid and mistrust authorities. It was a huge challenge to gain their trust and seek to instil hope – which at the time we were not sure was justified – that they could reach the UK by legal routes, rather than being smuggled or trafficked or risking their lives on deadly container lorries. Without interpreters, this trust could never have been built and we could not have completed the court cases that ultimately brought them to join family members here.

Our very first clients were Syrians, and dozens of Arabic speakers contacted us, eager to help in any way they could. All felt driven by a strong sense of duty to put their skills into practice and support us in communicating with our clients and ultimately bringing them to their families.

Then, sometime in 2016, Mona arrived, and we were suddenly on a whole new level. A confident, warm woman, she swept into the lives of our Eritrean clients full of energy and wisdom. Although she spoke a dizzying array of languages (Tigrigna, Arabic, French and others) she was not only an interpreter, but a confidante, aunt, sister and surrogate mother. The teenage boys she accompanied alongside us throughout 2016 and 2017, in Italy and in France, dropped their defences and gave her their immediate trust. She knew how to address them firmly and directly when needed, and gently when they needed the space to be children. She was always professional but her human empathy was always also there, clear to see. An unforgettable moment was when we spoke by phone to a witness in one of our cases, a survivor of a shipwreck on the Mediterranean, who had witnessed the death of our client's mother at sea. She interpreted and cried simultaneously, tears silently pouring down her cheeks as she encouraged him to continue.

Mona was an excellent organiser and a deeply professional interpreter: After the demolition of the camp at Calais in October 2016, she helped arrange for us to speak to a group of some two dozen boys from Eritrea who had been sent to a lonely village in central France in the middle of winter. While we were preparing their cases for the court, she became acquainted with them and their families and explained to us with wisdom, tact, and expert knowledge of her country of origin what they were trying to express to us. She was able to translate our advice and the vagaries of the English legal system equally to urbane, well-educated boys from the Eritrean capital, Asmara, and to boys from rural communities in the border villages of the Sudan. Miraculously, she kept their hopes up through the long months when it seemed there was no hope. At the same time she supported their impatient, anxious

families in the UK, even on one occasion giving a phone to a family member in the UK to ensure that we could keep in touch.

Once she had helped bring these boys home to their families and their new homes in the UK, Mona knew that their journeys were far from over. She worked with Safe Passage to secure further support for them in their new communities, and fiercely advocated on their behalf to make their arrivals as smooth as possible. She also ran other cases for Safe Passage, assisting separated families outside Europe and as far as Saudi Arabia.

When we asked her what drove her and where her huge energy came from, she expressed a deep sense of duty linked to her faith. She said that she could not bear injustice. She said she felt blessed, and wished to give something in return.

She was loved and admired by her colleagues, by community leaders and by activists for migrant rights across the UK.

Most of all, she was loved by the clients and their families, who remained in contact with her long after we had moved on to our next cases. It was a family member who gave us the devastating news that Mona's story had suddenly been interrupted in mid-flow by Covid-19.

How unimaginable it is to be speaking about Mona in the past tense. We knew her for a painfully short time. We cannot really yet believe that our powerful, fiercely loving friend who always supported others through tragedy and injustice, has been stricken down by this new tragedy, this new injustice. Our thoughts go out to her family, her children and all that loved her.

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