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Agency Founded by Two Dallas Women Helps Asylum Seekers

By Robert Miller

A Dallas social worker and a Dallas attorney have created one of the leading agencies in the country that helps immigrants and refugees seeking asylum in North Texas.

Serena Simmons Connelly and Elizabeth “Betsy” Healy were both volunteers in a small asylum program of a nonprofit agency. When it was dissolved in 1999, they decided to create a bigger asylum program, the Human Rights Initiative of North Texas.

Ms. Connelly, is the daughter of philanthropist Harold Simmons and was a classics major at Brown University. She was already disposed toward helping others when she was sold on pursuing a master’s in social work at the University of Texas at Arlington by former Visiting Nurse Association official Linda Wassenich.

Ms. Healy, daughter of Dr. Ken Leveno, chief of obstetrics at Parkland Memorial Hospital and a faculty member of UT Southwestern Medical Center, was also well indoctrinated in assuming one’s debt to society.

After graduating from Notre Dame University and the University of Cincinnati Law School, she plunged into pro bono work as an associate at Cowles & Thompson law firm.

HRI was incorporated as a nonprofit agency in December 1999 and opened in January 2000 “to provide excellent legal representation and social services to the most marginalized victims of human rights abuses and to serve as a community resource on international human rights issues,” Ms. Connelly said.

Significant funding for HRI comes from the Harold Simmons Foundation and the Simmons Family Foundation Advised Fund of the Dallas Foundation. Lisa Simmons Epstein is president of the Harold Simmons Foundation, and Ms. Connelly is its director.

“Most of our clients are seeking asylum, legal status that allows them to start a new life in North Texas,” Ms. Connelly said.

“To qualify, they must have a ‘well-founded fear’ of persecution in their home country. “This is often demonstrated by past persecution, including torture and rape.

“HRI also assists immigrants with special abuse issues, such as women and children victims of domestic violence,” which may include sexual assault, stalking or human trafficking.

Special Services

Ms. Connelly said she and Ms. Healy “knew there was no other agency in this region that provided those services” in a comprehensive way.

Ms. Healy said the 1,500 or so legal cases the agency was involved in by the end of 2005 came from more than 30 countries, primarily from Africa, but also from the Middle East, Pakistan, India and Nepal.

The agency doesn’t see too many cases from South America or China because they are generally handled by agencies on the West and East Coasts, Ms. Healy explained.

HRI programs can be divided into four categories: asylum cases, violence against women, client services and the child immigrant project.

Client services are needed because most clients are ineligible to work or accept government assistance during the legal process.

“HRI has developed creative solutions to meet their needs during this period when they are extremely marginalized and have little hope,” said Pat Melton, HRI spokeswoman.

Getting Help

The agency has established partnerships with around 25 nonprofit agencies, including Parkland Hospital’s Refugee Center, Centers for Survivors of Torture, North Dallas Shared Ministries, Hope Cottage, Genesis Women’s Shelter, the Family Place, Resource Center of Dallas, Victims Outreach, Women’s Center of Tarrant County, Mission Arlington, Denton County Health Department and Mission Fort Worth.

From the beginning, Ms. Connelly said, HRI was committed to bringing a high degree of professionalism to the agency.

That included picking the brain of veteran Meadows Foundation vice president/administration Bob Weiss and bringing longtime Texas Instruments controller Cannon Flowers on board as HRI president and chief executive.

Ms. Healy’s experience as a pro bono attorney in asylum cases for the agency that led Ms. Healy and Ms. Connelly to found HRI Human Rights Initiative has resulted in a cooperative and productive relationship with the legal fraternity here.

“HRI recruits, trains and supervises pro bono attorneys to execute the majority of our caseload,” Ms. Melton said. “Last year, legal professionals provided 2,260.64 hours of pro bono legal

services. The value of in-kind services (\$544,441) exceeded our operating budget of \$452,000 in 2004.

“We maintain a professional relationship with Dallas immigration courts and are honored that its judges have volunteered their time at our attorney trainings.

“Because of our ethic of professionalism with clients, courts and volunteers, HRI has won 82 percent of its asylum cases, in comparison to the national average of a 38 percent success rate.”

Based on the success of HRI, Ms. Connelly said, Dallas ranks second to no one, not New York or any other major city that provides the services in this field.

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