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PEOPLE

## Pro bono work helps lawyer see world from a new perspective

By Kirk Loggins / Tennessean Staff Writer

Nashville lawyer Greg Oakley says he learned a lot when he volunteered to help an African immigrant get political asylum in the United States.

"I saw the world and Nashville, Tenn., from a completely different perspective," says Oakley, whom the Nashville Bar Association has honored as "volunteer of the year" in its program of legal aid for people who can't afford to hire attorneys.

"Anything that broadens your horizons like that can only be good for you."

Oakley said he had never dealt with immigration law before the director of the NBA's pro bono publico ("for the public good" in Latin) program asked him to meet with an immigrant from Eritrea last August.

He said immigrant Gebremicael, 24, explained that he fled Eritrea, which fronts on the Red Sea, because he faced religious persecution as a Jehovah's Witness.

"His country was involved in a nine-year civil war with Ethiopia, and essentially everybody has to serve in the armed forces," Oakley said. The Eritrean government "became upset" with local Jehovah's Witnesses because they refuse to serve in the army or take part in political activity.

Gebremicael fled to Ethiopia and then to the United States after government officials ordered him to report for military service, Oakley said. He wound up in Nashville because he has relatives here.

But he could not stay in the United States without being granted political asylum.

Oakley said Gebremicael's case was relatively simple, once he discussed the problem with Marilyn Devine, a Nashville lawyer who specializes in immigration law.

"What he needed was someone that would listen to him and take the time to understand what his situation was and take everything he said and put it into English that the Immigration and Naturalization Service would understand."

Oakley said the INS has already granted religious asylum to a number of Jehovah's Witnesses from Eritrea, so the legal challenge was simply to convince an INS hearing officer in Memphis that Gebremicael was indeed a Jehovah's Witness and that he had nowhere else to go.

The NBA's pro bono program never asks volunteer lawyers to go out of town on behalf of clients, said the program's director, Victoria Webb.

But Oakley took Gebremicael and his cousin, who acted as his interpreter, to Memphis for the hearing, and they all stayed with Oakley's parents in Germantown.

It took about two weeks to get a ruling that Gebremicael can stay in the United States. Oakley is now trying to help his client get a permit to look for work in the medical field.

Gebremicael said in an interview that Oakley "worked hard for me."

"He was like my brother, like my friend, not like a lawyer. ... I have hope now."

Oakley, who handles civil litigation for the firm of Manier Herod Hollabaugh & Smith, said he doesn't usually get such a positive reaction from his clients.

"When I called and told him that he was going to be able to stay in this country, his reaction was something that I would never experience in my normal practice."

And, the lawyer said, "To me he is the prototypical example of what the United States is all about. I have absolutely no doubt that he will make a valuable contribution to this country."

Oakley, 32, earned his law degree from the University of Tennessee and began practicing law in 1993.

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