

Rocky Talk

As man freed from Gitmo, lawyer thinks of other 700

John Holland will make you laugh, which is a curious thing, first of all, because he is a lawyer, and because the cases he takes are ones that make people wag fingers and call him a traitor.

What he did this week, you could argue, was the equivalent of buying a winning lottery ticket, tossing a no-hitter or diving into a haystack and snagging the proverbial needle.

Maybe getting one of the more than 700 remaining prisoners out of Guantanamo Bay is the equivalent of performing all three.

John Holland, a 60-year-old Denver civil rights attorney, did it. You may have read the story.

On Wednesday, he secured the release of Mohamed Al Amin. He had been imprisoned, uncharged, since the day six years ago that Pakistani bounty hunters turned the then 17-year-old student over to the Americans.

I asked how he did it.

"Well," he said, in mirth, "we do have a very, very large firm here." He has one partner, his 29-year-old daughter, Anna Cayton-Holland. It was Anna who asked her father to volunteer for Guantanamo cases, about a day after she graduated from Northwestern law school three years ago and joined his practice.

He was reluctant. He had long ago done his bit, starting as an advocate for the poor after graduating law school in '72.

"I went for a walk," John Holland said. "I'm out there thinking, if I tell her no, what case can I tell her we can work on?"

He has since been to Guantanamo four times, while Anna has made three trips. They still have three clients there.

The prison is a surreal place, John Holland said.

You first apply for a security clearance, which takes a couple of months. And then, there is the application process, which takes another several months.

Finally, you arrive at the prison. It takes time, but they walk you into a sparsely furnished room. The client is led inside in shackles.

"Overhead is a camera to videotape you," Anna Cayton-Holland said. "They say there is no sound, but I don't know if I believe that."

The men are emotionless.

"They are living in a grave there," Anna Cayton-Holland said. "They are dead to the world. There is not much for them to believe in."

And how do they know you are a lawyer and not another government agent posing as one?

"Even after almost four years, we're still working on trust," John Holland said. "And honestly, why should they trust us? . . . Why do they even need a lawyer? What's the use? What good is a lawyer when there is no true legal system for them?"

Mohamed Al Amin had traveled to Pakistan from Mozambique to study the Quran, John Holland said.

As an outsider, he was fair game for the bounty hunters when the Americans arrived seeking terrorists.

The U.S. government approved him for release in February. Things move slowly at Guantanamo. He was turned over to Mozambique authorities Wednesday.

"Lawyers will call and say congratulations, but I still feel bad. Angry, really," John Holland said. "We all celebrate with each release, but there are more than 700 others, not counting those in secret prisons elsewhere. Not a time to celebrate."

But Amin's release, he explained, was also special. He and Anna had traveled to

Mozambique and met the man's family, worked long hours to convince the government there to accept him.

"If you call someone a terrorist long enough, you see, nobody will want them back," John Holland said.

Of meeting the man's family, Anna Cayton-Holland said, "It was unbelievable, just the overwhelming love that was there. I will never forget how well we were treated."

How do they get paid? John Holland laughed. "This is a man whose family makes less than \$400 a year. You know, we kept sending bills, but they always came back."

They do much of their Guantanamo work through the large Washington, D.C., law firm of Cohen, Milstein, Hausfeld & Toll. The proceeds of their other legal work also helps, he said.

"I didn't get into law to make a lot of money. It's like my mom said," John Holland explained, "do good and the world will be good to you."

"Mostly we do this work because we are Americans, and we believe America is struggling to hold onto its moral soul."

There are hundreds of lawyers across the country doing the same work, they said. Each one of them is simply trying to re-establish the rule of law in this country.

"No one wants to see terrorists set free," Anna Cayton-Holland said. "We believe in our system, that you can't torture people and use the fruits of that to convict them."

"We're tired of people saying we are coddling terrorists. We're not. We're saying you can try and convict, separate the terrorist wheat from the innocent chaff in the true light of the legal system."

Said John Holland, "Who knows how many more are innocent like our client. The only good news is Al Amin was such a youngster that he still has his life to lead."



Bill Johnson

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