



## Shyima Hall: Human Trafficking Victim Describes Fight for the American Dream

**H**uman trafficking is a \$46 billion dollar industry worldwide, with an estimated twenty million people living as slaves. An estimated 17,000 new slaves are brought into the United States every year. It is the world's fastest growing criminal enterprise. Surprising to many, it is thriving here in Orange County. The OCBA Human Trafficking Task Force will identify ways in which lawyers can get involved to prevent human trafficking in Orange County.

We cannot tolerate a society where children are forced to work in a horrid world of sexual and/or labor servitude. As President of the OCBA, I am committed to marshaling the resources of our legal community to assist the victims of this terrible crime.

Shyima Hall, now twenty-seven, helps us put a face on the tragedy of human trafficking. Sold by her parents in Alexandria, Egypt to a wealthy couple (to pay off a paltry debt, and thereby regain the family's "honor"), she was thrust into slavery at the tender age of eight. Her new "home" in Cairo was a palatial compound, with an indoor pool and seventeen-car garage. But it was her prison.

Her name was no longer Shyima. It was "stupid girl." No shoes or pajamas. One ragged outfit (which she washed in a bucket). Her only meal was late-night, foraging through leftovers from the family's feasts. She slept locked in a windowless, airless, storage room, either freezing or drenched in sweat. She rose before her "masters," and stayed up long after they went to bed, cooking and cleaning non-stop (even through broken bones and high fevers). If she dared look in her captor's eyes? Beaten. "Time became meaningless," says Shyima. "My brain was on overload, trying to survive."

But this isn't a description of the sorrows she endured while still in Egypt. It describes what occurred right in our backyard—in a luxury, gated, Irvine community. At ten years old, Shyima was smuggled here by a man (hired by her enslavers who were moving to California). The flight to Los Angeles had taken twenty-four hours, and Shyima was terrified. Shyima later learned what the man told Customs to get her into the United States: "She is my adoptive daughter. I am taking her to Disneyland."

Shyima ached to return to the dirt-poor slums of Alexandria, so she could play marbles, and climb through dusty rubble, with other children. She missed the closeness of her parents and eleven siblings, all of whom slept on the floor. "Feeling loved is more important than all the riches of the world," Shyima told me. "If I could be back with my family, it didn't matter to me if we lived in a hole in the ground."

At ten years old, Shyima helped raise her captor's children (meals,

ironing school clothes, carefully placing toothpaste on brushes, etc.), while aching for school herself. "It broke my heart that I couldn't go to school. Children in America are so lucky. In other countries, you don't even have the right to go to school."

Shyima was a "hidden girl," even when allowed to venture into the outside world. She was tasked with taking her captor's kids to the playground, for example, where neighborhood moms would gaze upon her with concerned curiosity. Her captors took her on a family trip to Big Bear (she rode in the back of the SUV, stuffed amongst the luggage), and to Disneyland (where she carried the family's belongings, and stood on silent "standby," while the family enjoyed food and rides).

Of escape, Shyima says, "Where would I run to? I could barely speak Arabic, certainly not English. They made me afraid of police and told me that my family would suffer if I ever left."

Shyima was finally rescued after a vigilant neighbor called authorities. But her ordeals were far from over. Nurtured by the kind people at the Orangewood Children & Family Center, a home for abused and needy children, she struggled to acclimate to being treated humanely again.

From Orangewood, she bounced between two strict "foster" families, until a third family adopted her. She bravely testified against



Shyima Hall attaining her U.S. citizenship

her enslavers in court, enduring cross-examination. She won a \$76,000 judgment (for "unpaid, minimum wages for hours worked"), which she planned to use for college. Instead, her adoptive family spent the money.

Shyima endured financial and physical setbacks even after she was freed, but she is a fighter. She reveled in the blessings of American opportunity, learning English and forging a life for herself. During school, she held part-time jobs at a mall, and joined the police Explorers program. "Working helped me to socialize with so many different types of

people, and to learn social norms." She rented her own, humble space, overjoyed at the dignity of independence, later marrying a supportive, loving man. They have a beautiful daughter, Athena, and another child on the way. Shyima is the author of a groundbreaking book, *Hidden Girl*, which details her saga. She speaks across the country as an educator and advocate against human trafficking.

Shyima relishes American values of equality and freedom. Her proudest moment was becoming a citizen. "Here in America, I feel like my life matters." And finding freedom's door in America, she has run through it, savoring every step.

By forming and supporting the OCBA Human Trafficking Task Force, I hope to come to you in the future with concrete steps that our organization and its members can take to help people like Shyima.



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