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Alumni Profile

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ALUMNI PROFILE

by *Natasha Parassram Conception**



Fitsum Alemu, a January 2001 LL.M. graduate from the Washington College of Law (WCL) and currently a lawyer at the Horn of Africa Center for Translation and Information Network (HACTIN) in Washington, D.C., received his law degree from Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest, Hungary. Originally from Ethiopia, Mr.

Alemu traveled to Hungary in 1988 on an academic scholarship. While at Eotvos Lorand University, Mr. Alemu witnessed many racist attacks against persons of color at the university, and as a result, helped establish the Martin Luther King Organization, named after the U.S. civil rights leader. This organization, which provides counseling and protection for the students, furthered Mr. Alemu's interest in human rights issues.

After graduating from Eotvos Lorand University in 1996, Mr. Alemu joined the Legal Defense Bureau for National and Ethnic Minorities (NEKI) in Budapest, where he provided legal advice to minorities, conducted investigations and reported on human rights violations, and prepared discrimination and police brutality cases for domestic and international courts, including the European Court of Human Rights. He also managed the Anti-Discrimination Litigation Project, a joint project with the European Roma Rights Center, which plans to litigate a series of cases dealing with discrimination in public accommodations, education, housing, and employment against the Romani population, an ethnic minority in Hungary.

During his tenure at NEKI, Mr. Alemu learned of the Central and Eastern European Fellowship Program, a joint fellowship program between the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law at WCL, the Open Society Institute, and the Constitutional and Legislative Policy Institute. The Fellowship Program brings prominent Eastern European human rights lawyers to the United States in order for them to obtain theoretical and practical training in litigating human rights issues in their respective home countries. Mr. Alemu was accepted into the Fellowship Program in 1996. Specializing in anti-discrimination law, he took courses on housing, employment, and sex discrimination, among other related civil rights courses.

During his second semester, he was assigned to the Fair Housing Council in Washington D.C., a civil rights center dealing with housing discrimination issues. Mr. Alemu worked as a fair housing specialist, investigating and reporting on housing discrimination problems. As part of his job, Mr. Alemu participated in a testing program, which involved sending protected "testers"—members of protected classes—to purchase, sell, or negotiate mortgage payments. The results were then compared against data gathered by members of unprotected classes, or comparison "testers." This method is widely accepted in the United States as an appropriate gauge of discrimination.

After finishing the Fellowship Program in 1997, Mr. Alemu resumed his position at NEKI in Budapest. Drawing on the civil rights litigation practices he learned while at WCL and during his practical training in the United States, he applied U.S.

methods—rarely used at the time in Europe—to combat discrimination.

For example, Mr. Alemu, through NEKI, applied his newly learned method of "testing" to public accommodation and employment discrimination cases and has already won four cases. Further, for the first time in Hungarian history, Mr. Alemu helped introduce expert testimony on police procedures in two police brutality cases. The expert analyzed methods of police incarceration and police behavior toward the Romani people and discussed the use of excessive force. The evidence presented was accepted by the Trial and Appeals Court of Budapest and led to a favorable decision for the victims. The case represented the first time a judge accepted a legal opinion from an expert other than a medical or economics expert.

Through NEKI, Mr. Alemu worked not only in protecting and providing legal representation for Hungarians, but also was actively involved in training other human rights lawyers in Europe. He educated lawyers on how to represent clients in civil rights cases in European courts and promoted the use of discrimination testing and expert testimony in courts. Mr. Alemu also trained lawyers throughout Eastern Europe to write petitions for civil rights cases, helped organize seminars to disseminate information, and with NEKI, published manuals on civil rights litigation.

Furthermore, Mr. Alemu also has been involved in trying to implement new anti-discrimination legislation in Hungary. Observing the need for a housing discrimination provision, Mr. Alemu wrote and proposed such a law in 1998. In 1999, he helped file a petition to the Hungarian Constitutional Court, requesting it to order Parliament to enact an anti-discrimination law. The claim was dismissed on the grounds that the current law provides adequate protection for Hungarians facing discrimination. Despite numerous obstacles, Mr. Alemu's efforts continue to publicize the very real, but often disregarded, evidence of discrimination in Hungary.

Mr. Alemu's efforts helped to revolutionize civil rights litigation in Eastern Europe. The newly introduced techniques of preparing and litigating such cases have earned Mr. Alemu and his organization acclaim in Hungary and throughout Europe. As a result of his pioneering activities, legal experts have joined in the discussion, and the methods that prevailed in the courts are now being taught at some Hungarian universities and at the Hungarian National Police College in Budapest. Mr. Alemu credits this achievement to his theoretical and practical training at WCL, and hopes the Fellowship Program will continue to provide training for other Eastern European human rights lawyers. "Through lawyers like me," he states, "WCL is involved in human rights protection in Hungary and in Eastern Europe."

Mr. Alemu returned to WCL in 2000 to pursue an LL.M. degree, focusing on immigration and asylum law. After graduating, he began his work with HACTIN, where he provides legal advice to mostly Ethiopian prospective immigrants and asylum seekers. Although he is happy to be working here in the United States among fellow Ethiopians, Mr. Alemu hopes to continue his international human rights work by training human rights defenders worldwide. 🌍

**Natasha Parassram Conception is a J.D. candidate at the Washington College of Law and a staff writer for the Human Rights Brief.*