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## Malaysian lawyer shadows JMLS clinics

Attorney looking to establish divorce clinic back home to fight lack of legal access

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In Malaysia, divorce rates have increased at a staggering pace in recent years, leaving many women of little means with no way to hire an attorney to represent them.

That disparity has driven one 26-year-old attorney to try and start a legal clinic aimed at helping women in family law matters. And if his plans come to fruition, a few clinic leaders at The John Marshall Law School can say they played a part in helping make it happen.

John Marshall welcomed Malaysian lawyer Mohammad Muzammil Bin Muhammad Hairiri to Chicago early in May. Hairiri shadowed the school's clinic leaders and got an inside look at the ins and outs of hosting free legal services to populations in need.

Hairiri's inspiration to launch a clinic dates back to when he was studying law at MARA University of Technology in Malaysia, where he graduated last year before he began working at the Johor Bahru office of the law firm Abdul Raman Saad & Associates, known in Malaysia as ARSA.

While finding a way to provide women with legal representation was just an idea in school, Hairiri said he met some fellow lawyer friends following school in what's called a pupillage, similar to a

clerkship, in which he realized there were others who had a similar interest in wanting to do something about the lack of access to justice for many Malaysian women.

"Basically, young lawyers, they are willing to give back to the society, but they don't really have the necessary platform for them to do so," he said.

Hairiri said there is a clinic available to helping women in the country's capital, Kuala Lumpur, but that's a four- to five-hour drive from where he's located in Johor Bahru, making it impossible for some women to seek help. He's hoping to remedy that by establishing a clinic locally that can help not only women going through a divorce, which he said is a lengthy process in Malaysia, but also in other family law matters and domestic abuse cases.

According to Hairiri, the reason there are so many underserved women in Malaysia is twofold. First, he said, divorce cases have spiked dramatically in recent years, more than doubling from about 24,000 in 2004 to more than 56,000 in 2012.

In about 80 percent of those cases, the women had no attorney, according to Hairiri. That means that in a majority of cases, the husbands prevail in attaining assets and child custody and women often walk away with no maintenance.

Hairiri attributed the increase in divorces to a decline in the economy that led many people to



**Mohammad Muzammil Hairiri, a 26-year-old lawyer from Johor Bahru, Malaysia, visited The John Marshall Law School from May 6 to 27 as a part of a trip sponsored by the U.S. Young Southeast Asian Leaders Grant and the American Council of Young Political Leaders. Hairiri visited the school to learn more about how its clinics works with the goal of helping him set up his own clinic in Malaysia, where he wants to help underserved women in divorce and other family law matters. Photo by Lauren P. Duncan**

lose their jobs and were unable to maintain households. Hairiri said in some cases Malaysian men file for divorce if they're unable or don't want to continue to financially support their wives and families.

The second issue is the price of an attorney, which he said prevents women, many who depended on their husbands for financial support, without a chance at representation.

"Legal representation is quite expensive, so the issue of access to justice, especially women in family law matters, it's very problematic, I believe," Hairiri said.

Hairiri said he's seen the issue firsthand while working at his corporate firm, where he said people will often walk in seeking legal help in their divorces, in which the firm will refer them to other family law practices.

He hasn't let his inability to

help those who walk into his firm's doors with family law matters hinder him. Hairiri and some of his lawyer friends have been setting up tables in shopping malls on the weekends, offering free on-the-spot legal advice to women.

But that isn't enough to help women through the full divorce process and in more complicated family law matters, which is why Hairiri has plans to establish a full-fledged clinic.

At John Marshall, he picked up a few tips on how to go about that, while also getting the chance to see how the United States legal system works.

Hairiri visited John Marshall as a part of a U.S. State Department program, called the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Grant, which is aimed at strengthening ties between the U.S. and Southeast Asia. He was a part of a cohort of 16 young people from

different counties in southeast Asia who traveled to the U.S. over the past month.

The organization here in the U.S. that sponsored his visit is the American Council of Young Political Leaders, or ACYPL.

He shadowed leaders at clinics and programs, including the Veterans Legal Support Center and Clinic, the Pro Bono Program and Clinic, the Restorative Justice Project and the Fair Housing Legal Support Center and Clinic, all at John Marshall.

While visiting the school in May before he flew back to Washington, D.C., last Saturday, Hairiri said he learned about establishing clinics, how to do intakes, how to coordinate volunteer lawyers and getting students involved.

"I think it directly relates to what I'm going to try to do back in Malaysia, which is to encourage more young lawyers ... and hopefully we can change someone's life," he said.

Another key component was developing a business plan, which he did at the advice of veterans clinic Executive Director Brian E. Clauss.

He's hopeful he can use his plan to get corporate firms and other companies to help donate to his cause.

While he said there isn't public funding available in Malaysia, there's a chance he could receive some seed funding through the State Department program that hosted him in Chicago.

"This project is still at its infancy," he said. "There are a lot of things that need to be considered, because in terms of funding

it, it's a very sensitive issue back home, especially if we got foreign funding as well, but it's something that I'll be looking forward to."

While at the John Marshall veterans clinic, Hairiri was able to glean some insights from Clauss on working with clients who have been victims of trauma as well as business-related aspects involved in setting up a clinic.

Clauss said he thinks Hairiri is going to face a few challenges in getting his clinic plans accepted in a legal community that has very little pro bono presence.

Clauss praised Hairiri for coming to a country with English as his second language and immersing himself in "something as nuanced as the law" in a different country.

At the same time, Clauss said he thinks the clinic teams at John Marshall learned a few things from Hairiri.

"I think we gained by explaining what we do, why we do it and providing insight to our culture and values," he said.

Kelly Lindstrom, staff attorney with the school's pro bono program, echoed Clauss' remarks about learning from Hairiri while he was here.

Lindstrom was able to take Hairiri to a few court hearings, including to Veterans Treatment Court and to the Leighton Criminal Court Building, where a student successfully argued on behalf of a human trafficking survivor to vacate a prostitution conviction.

"There's no right to counsel in Malaysia, so he really enjoyed, I

think ... that there is a right to counsel here. I think he really enjoyed seeing the level playing field of both parties being represented by counsel. I think that's a big part of his clinic plan ... really, what he wants to ensure is equal access to the courts and to justice for women, primarily."

After spending a full week with Hairiri, traveling to events and courthouses, Lindstrom said she's inspired by his plans and passion for them.

"His commitment to justice is very admirable. I was impressed by him and I have no doubt that he is going to follow through and set up the clinic to assist women.

"He seems really bothered by the fact and determined to make a difference in his country and ensure that women have access to justice, because it seems like a big part of the problem, especially in relation to family law," Lindstrom said.

"The women don't get the maintenance they're entitled to and they end up destitute, whereas the men can go into court and they have attorneys and they can get much better results," she said.

Hairiri leaves the U.S. to return to Malaysia Saturday. This was his first trip to the U.S., which he admitted he had reservations about when hearing about the Trump administration's travel ban against several countries with large Muslim populations.

He said he was "shocked" at the warm welcome he received once he arrived.

He added that he was impressed with his visits to several

courthouses in the city, including the way he saw judges being receptive to pro se litigants, which he said isn't always the case in Malaysia. Of the many cultural differences he noticed in how the courts are operated, Hairiri said he immediately noticed that people don't bow when they walk into courtrooms in the U.S. as they are required to do in Malaysia.

"Overall, I think the experience has been really wonderful," he said.

In terms of getting his clinic started, Hairiri recognizes that he's got a lot cut out for him, including cultural challenges that women face and additional help women need after divorce or other family law proceedings, including how to go about attaining a job, as many women do not have post-graduate education.

Others have even greater challenges, as he's encountered women who have received death threats from their husbands.

A part of his plan includes finding ways to help those women who need more than a lawyer in a divorce case.

"I think in terms of this initiative, we would like to help them not only in terms of divorce proceeding but also post-divorce proceeding as well," he said.

"What I've learned here [in Chicago] is that you have to start from somewhere," he said. "This is our humble beginning and hopefully after this program I can expand it more."

Hairiri said anyone who is interested in contacting him about his plans can reach him at [muzammilhairiri@hotmail.com](mailto:muzammilhairiri@hotmail.com).