

First meeting with Career Counselor by Linda Zimmerman

“I just received my work authorization card. Do you want to see it?”

“Sure. It’s a good picture of you. Are you ‘ready’ to work in the US?”

“What kind of work did you do in Cameroon?”

“I was a Program Coordinator for a non-profit that helped people with HIV.”

“Very Interesting. Do you want to do the same type of work in the US?”

“I’ll do anything!”

This is a conversation I have with many asylum-seekers who are survivors of torture. I had read Florence’s pre-migration story. She was an activist for gay rights in Cameroon, although not “gay” herself. She attended a rally near her village in August. Someone noticed her and informed the police. On her way home from work she was forced into a car with three men and taken to a “safe house.” She was raped by all three men and dumped in a field a few miles from her home. A passerby noticed a body and got a driver to bring Florence to the hospital. One week after her trauma Florence borrowed money from a friend, applied for a tourist visa and fled Cameroon to seek asylum in the US. Florence left Cameroon with her passport, her phone, and the clothes on her back.

What does a Jewish, Caucasian, middle class, American woman have in common with a Muslim, Fulani from Cameroon? We shared a goal. Florence’s goal was the focus of our relationship. Florence wanted to work and I knew how to help her get a job. **Isn’t equal opportunity a core American value?** Florence’s motivation and persistence energized me. After two weeks, she started working as a personal care assistant on weekends earning \$13 per hour. She lived with a “host family.” After three months, I helped Florence enroll in a twenty-week administrative support job training program. She was very future oriented. We never discussed the past.

Eight months later:

“I received a certificate from my administrative support training program.” Do you want to see it?

“Absolutely. Florence, I’m so proud of you! Are you interviewing for any administrative assistant jobs?”

“I already got a job offer. I start next week full-time at a small non-profit. My pay is \$16 per hour. I am so happy!”

“Florence, you made me feel so happy too. Let’s talk in two weeks. OK?”

“OK.” I’m glad that I’m in America.

(please note: identity of client was changed for confidentiality and privacy).