



ALGERIAN STORY

story collected in 2004

I am from Algeria from Atlas. In the winter it is very cold there – much colder than Belfast. I left Algeria because I had a military problem there with the Algerian army. Everyone has to spend 2 years in the army doing national service. I was in the army for 6 months, living on the border between Morocco and Algeria and life was always 50-50.

I don't like having to shoot people but immigration was not happy with this reason for me leaving my own country. I don't like weapons. You are supposed to spend money on food for children but not for weapons of war. I became a deserter and was put in jail for deserting, for 8 months, but was released after 4 months. However, I was not a free man and had to stay in Algeria with my sister. I moved from Morocco to Spain and then to France. The French have a much more extreme

government than Algeria. I also had a sister in France but whilst France is good friends with Algeria, they did not give me the right to stay.

Britain was a different story. Immigration wanted my passport with visa from Algeria. I had to claim asylum but they did not believe that I had a passport. I claimed asylum with the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) and they were able to put me in a hostel and then I stayed in Fitzroy Avenue and was given £38 a week. There were five of us in the house from Algeria, Angola, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. I did not speak English when I came but I started English lessons with NICEM. After NICEM, I continued this with BIFHE (The Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education).

After a while, they stopped my benefit and then I had to go to charity organisations: Corrymeela and St.

Clement's. I was thinking of going back to Algeria but then I came to St. Clement's and they gave me food and a place to sleep. There are many people here [in Northern Ireland] who stay for 3 to 4 years without benefit and they are working here illegally, but this is not right. I have sent my ID to the embassy in London but they have not sent me any papers. Because of this, the London Home Office do not really believe that I am Algerian, so this is another problem. They told me I was lying. The Home Office have not told me what to do next and so they have stopped my money. I do not have the right to stay and so I do not have any options. My objective was to stay here and to get a visa so I can get a job but I don't have that right. I can't talk to my mother at home. I try to send things to my mother, small things to let her know that I am OK.

Every person is similar to the other when you come into this country.

They are all treated without respect. I still talk with my family in Algeria, my sister in Algeria. I lived with her so that the police don't know where I am. I think the system is crazy here. Asylum seekers are seen as lazy: people who don't want to work, and yet we are not allowed to work so how can you tell us we are lazy? I have friends from different backgrounds and I like them. The system is bad but people are good. The system does not manage people well.

I know the church in Algeria but in Europe I have a broader view of the church. In Algeria the main religion is Muslim. I am Muslim but I do not practice or pray, but I do Ramadan. I am a bad Muslim. When I came to the UK, I did not enter a mosque. I know there are Christians here but yet they still go to war. I think Christian religions have a problem between Christianity and the government. The government is building humans as robot machines. They are made to work but they are not respected or valued. In Algeria, it is the same problem, they look for money not character.

I have a military card and an ID card which was a false card to show that I had finished with the army but I gave it to my solicitor here to be analysed. Even if I do stay with my family, I won't be able to do anything but here when I stay, I have to wait for people to give me things. People view you differently when you can work. You are different when you are free.

I have been able to do some voluntary work and my language is improving. We used to have to go to the airport to get our visas stamped. I used to get £38 a week and it cost £9 to get there by taxi. However, some Christian people put on a minibus which costs £2 and this helped many people. I have now been in Ireland for 18 months and the last 5 months I have gone without benefit.

When Jesus came, he had to make many sacrifices and sometimes God tests you to see what is in your character. I respect God now, He is real. My problem is really nothing since many people have problems. You ask yourself why? But what can I do? I am waiting for a ticket from NICEM and Immigration to be able to return to Algeria. I do not know when this will be. When I go back, I do not know what will happen.

This man has now returned to Algeria.

St. Clement's Retreat & Conference Centre, a Redemptorist Community and Mission on the Antrim Road in Belfast.

The Corrymeela Community is a group of people who are committed to the healing of Social, Religious and Political divisions that exist in Northern Ireland and throughout the World.