

Wendy Hughes-Madondo and Advocate Bruce Bedderson:

## THE JOURNEY OF TRESOR MATOLEO



*Wendy Hughes-Madondo*



*Advocate Bruce Bedderson*

**T**resor Matoleo's application for asylum in South Africa was first rejected by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) in 2008, whereupon he immediately lodged an appeal. On his way to the appeal hearing he was robbed of all his documents, including his appeal papers. Arriving at the DHA offices paperless, security personnel refused him entry and the appeal was dismissed in his absence.

Mr Matoleo then requested a legal representative to lodge an application on his behalf for condonation for missing his appeal hearing. This was done and the representative's office contact details were supplied for correspondence with the DHA.

While waiting to hear whether the condonation would be granted, Mr Matoleo was stopped by police, who requested proof of residence. His frantic explanations fell on deaf ears and were met with the retort: "Tell your story at Lindela."

Lawyers for Human Rights stepped in and secured his release from the Lindela Repatriation Centre. However, it was discovered that his prior application for condonation had, indeed, been granted, notice of which had been sent to his legal representative, who had omitted to inform him of the new appeal date. Once again, his absence at this hearing resulted in the refusal of a subsequent condonation application!

Mr Matoleo then took his woes to the brand-new offices

of ProBono.Org in Durban. A request for assistance was answered by Wendy Hughes-Madondo who, along with Advocate Bruce Bedderson, offered to take up the case pro bono, seven days prior to Mr Matoleo's deportation date.

Their combined experience of some 30 years was gained primarily in corporate law, but both rose to the challenge of engaging in this new legal field – and in double-quick time too! Together they managed to assemble a thorough application in just a few days, resulting in the suspension of Mr Matoleo's deportation proceedings with 24 hours to spare.

In Ms Hughes-Madondo's words:

"We were approached by ProBono.Org in Durban to bring an application, which is run-of-the mill work for our firm. Into our office walked a neatly-dressed and well-groomed man. He was armed with a pen and a smile. Only later did I learn that Tresor Matoleo had hitchhiked from Ficksburg in the Free State – where he is plying his trade as a hairdresser so as to make an honest living – to reach Durban in time for his consultation with us on a Friday morning.

"Here was a man, keeping up his own dignity despite being a victim of a system that failed him, and despite having a place called 'home' which is a country he cannot return to.

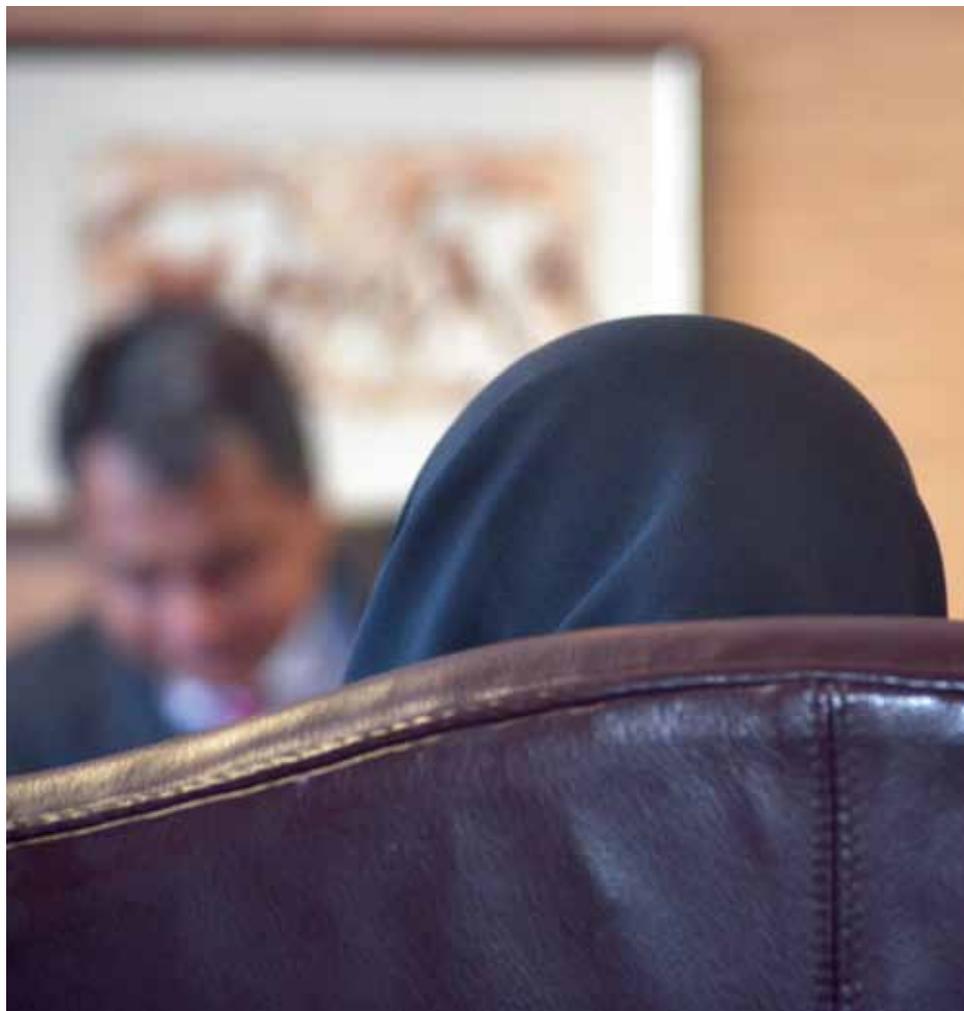
"For me, meeting and representing Mr Matoleo was a real eye-opener. Through him I learnt what it actually means

to be a 'refugee', and it alerted me to the physical and emotional hardships of many, many people throughout the world who are in a similar position.

"In commercial practice, the bottom line counts. But I ask myself: if there were no *pro bono* legal services in our country, what would have happened to Tresor? This exposure to the impact *pro bono* legal work can have on the lives of vulnerable individuals has led to my firm adopting a voluntary policy in terms of which all the professionals have made a commitment to ring-fence time for *pro bono* work."

Mr Matoleo wants to forget the trauma he left behind in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Hopefully he can also forget the dismal start he had in South Africa.

A big thank you to Wendy Hughes-Madondo and Advocate Bruce Bedderson for their assistance.



*A refugee finding refuge in a lawyer's office*