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## Woman gets asylum after 15-year battle

Aruna Vallabhaneni of India may remain in U.S. to avoid domestic abuse

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After a 15-year struggle, a woman from India has been granted asylum to stay in the U.S. to avoid her Indian husband's savage beatings, said attorney Royal F. Berg.

Berg, who represented his client, Aruna Vallabhaneni, for 14 years, said she is one of the few victims of domestic violence to be granted asylum in the U.S. for that reason.

Vallabhaneni's husband, Koteswara, broke her nose so badly, Berg said, that she lost her sense of smell, and "he kicked her in the abdomen so severely she had to have a hysterectomy at age 28."

Vallabhaneni, now 48, said her husband beat her almost from the time she entered into a marriage arranged by her parents when she was 17 in 1983, until she fled India in 1997.

She said she stayed married for the sake of her children, whom she finally left with her parents.

Berg said he worked on the case so long because "I felt deeply committed to this cause of protecting a person who had suffered such great persecution."

U.S. Immigration Judge Robert D. Vinikoor in Chicago granted Vallabhaneni asylum after a hearing on June 21, Berg said. He said he delayed announcing the result until his client held a gathering for her friends on Sunday.

The case is *In the Matter of Aruna Vallabhaneni*. No. A76724694.

Vallabhaneni said she is from Hyderabad, India. She has two children, a son, Dheeru, today 28,

and a daughter, Shree, 25.

"My son, as he was growing up, ... he wouldn't go to sleep. He's scared. ... He believed if he was awake, his father would not beat me," she said.

"My daughter said, 'Mommy, let's go somewhere.'"

At one point, Vallabhaneni said her husband tried to kill her by turning on a large tank of flammable, cooking gas and throwing it at her.

She got money from her brother, Berg said, and flew to the U.S. on a visitor's visa.

"I left my children with my parents," Vallabhaneni said. She feared she could not support her children in the U.S. and "I didn't want to disrupt their education," she said.

"One thing I regret is not bringing them here with me."

After a brief stay in New York, Vallabhaneni came to Chicago in April 1997 and has worked at numerous jobs.

"She tried to find somebody to help her apply for political asylum, but wasn't able to do so. She applied on her own," Berg said.

The Asylum Office of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services denied her request and instead "placed her in removal proceedings," Berg said.

Vallabhaneni represented herself before Vinikoor in 1998. The judge also denied her request for asylum and gave her 30 days to leave the country or be deported, Berg said.

Vallabhaneni said a clerk in the Immigration Court told her she could appeal.

She spoke to a lawyer on the North Side who told her, "the only person who could help me is Royal Berg" and gave her Berg's card.



Immigration attorney Royal F. Berg (right) posed with his client, Aruna Vallabhaneni, whom he won asylum for after 15 years of struggle. Vallabhaneni fled India in 1997 after being abused for years by her husband. Photo courtesy of Paul Berg.

Berg filed an appeal with the Board of Immigration Appeals in Falls Church, Va. He said in a rare occurrence, the board granted an oral argument in 2001, then sent the case back to Chicago for additional testimony in 2002.

Since that time, Berg said, the Department of Justice and later the Department of Homeland Security has announced each year that it would publish regulations dealing with domestic violence as a basis for political asylum.

The regulations were never issued. Due to the expectation of such rules, Vallabhaneni's case became inactive for several years.

T. Shawn Taylor, a friend of Vallabhaneni's, said she met her in 2005 when Vallabhaneni was collecting signatures on a petition for herself on Michigan Avenue in the belief that this might help.

"It was January. It was cold," Taylor said. "She didn't have a

hat on and she didn't have any gloves. ... Her hair was covered with snow. ... I think she was just grasping at straws. She was desperate."

Recently, Vallabhaneni's case was reopened and "set for a final hearing in June 2012," Berg said.

"This time, she had an attorney with her," Berg said, meaning himself. Vallabhaneni testified and they also presented newspaper articles showing that female domestic violence victims are rarely helped by police in India and perpetrators are rarely prosecuted.

The judge granted asylum.

In recent years, Vallabhaneni has been a flight attendant for Southwest Airlines, and she does much volunteer work, her lawyer said.

She has not seen her son since she left India. She does have a relationship with her daughter, who lives in New York, he said.

The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement declined comment.