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Former child maid from Egypt becomes US citizen

BY AMY TAXIN
Associated Press

More than a decade ago, 10-year-old Shyima Hall was brought to Southern California by an affluent Egyptian couple who forced her to sleep in a cold garage at night and spend her days working as a maid.

For nearly two years, Hall ironed clothes, washed dishes and handled other domestic chores until authorities freed her.

On Thursday, she met with officials again but this time to proudly take the oath of allegiance to America as a newly minted U.S. citizen - a key step on her path to becoming a police officer or immigration agent to help other victims of human trafficking.

"Now I can move on with my career and start my life the way I want it," the 22-year-old said, her eyes sparkling after the ceremony on Thursday in Montebello. "It's just something I've waited for for a long time."

Hall was sent to work for an Egyptian couple as a domestic servant in Cairo when she was 9. The following year, Abdel Nasser Youssef Ibrahim and his then-wife Amal Ahmed Ewis-abd El Motelib arranged for someone to apply for a tourist visa on her behalf and brought her to the United States, U.S. court records show.

In 2000, Hall set foot in California - but only inside the spacious home where Ibrahim and Motelib lived with their five children in Irvine. She was not allowed to play outside the house or with the other children, but rather slept in the garage without electricity and manually washed her clothes in a bucket, the documents show.

Both Ibrahim and Motelib slapped Hall and told her police would arrest her if they saw her outside the home, the documents show, adding they knew her visa had expired and did nothing to extend it.

For nearly two years, she lived in the garage, worked full time and was not allowed to attend school. A neighbor became suspicious and called police.

After her rescue, Hall wound up in foster care and bounced around from home to home. She was adopted by a family in Beaumont and was able to obtain legal status to remain in the country and eventually got her green card.

Hall - who took her adoptive family's surname - said she felt like the family was more enamored of her case than of her and weren't supportive of her efforts to start her career, which prompted her to move out and start a life of her own.



Jae C. Hong

Shyima Hall, left, takes the oath of citizenship during a citizenship ceremony in Montebello, Calif., Thursday, Dec. 15, 2011. Hall was brought to California in 2000 by an Egyptian family. She was forced to live in their garage and work as their servant for nearly two years before authorities freed her.



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She took classes at college and got a job. She is now a sales supervisor at an upscale watch store and volunteers for her local police department in the hopes of becoming an officer. Now, with her naturalization certificate in hand, she can pursue her dream.

"No one really can tell you you can't do that or you can't be that person," she said after the naturalization ceremony for 900 new citizens. "I can be who I want to be and that's the most important part for me."

Hall said she doesn't dwell on the past and tries to look forward. She would also like to get her U.S. passport and visit Egypt to see her 10 brothers and sisters.

Mark Abend, a supervisory special agent at Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said he met Hall when she was a frightened child rescued by police.

Over time, she began to confide in investigators about her experience, learned English, graduated from high school and has become an impassioned advocate for trafficking victims, speaking about her experience at training sessions held by law enforcement.

"For her to be able to go through all that and still keep her head up and not be suffering from severe depression... for her to actually pull it all together and become very successful is really amazing to me," said Abend, who attended the ceremony along with Hall's friends and attorneys.

In 2006, Ibrahim and Motelib pleaded guilty to holding Hall in involuntary servitude, forced labor, conspiracy and harboring an illegal immigrant. Ibrahim was sentenced to 36 months in prison and Motelib was sentenced to 22 months. Both were ordered to pay \$76,000 to Hall for her work for the family.

The Associated Press reported on the case in a series in 2008 on the exploitation of children in Africa.

Moteib was deported to Egypt in 2008. Ibrahim was determined to be subject to deportation, but an immigration judge ruled he could remain in the country.

Ibrahim is under an order of supervision and regularly reports to immigration authorities, said Virginia Kice, a spokeswoman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

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