THE SLAVE DOWN THE STREET

Sinta, an Indonesian woman from South Sumatra, alleges that she was trafficked into the US to work for almost no pay in a suburban Virginia home. She was photographed on May 31 at her attorney's house.

DID A PROMINENT POLITICAL ACTIVIST ILLEGALLY TRAFFIC A WOMAN TO BE HER OWN PERSONAL SERVANT?

BY CHRIS VOGEL
PHOTOGRAPH BY GREG KAHN

IN THE PREDAWN STILLNESS, SINTA'S HEART THUMPED INSIDE HER CHEST

as she crept toward the front door. Though she knew her employers were sleeping upstairs and might not be awake for hours, she strained to listen for the faintest footstep or whisper. It was winter in Vienna, Virginia, 33 degrees, icy, and wet. Wearing only a flimsy cardigan and a thin pair of black slacks—the same outfit she'd worn seven months earlier when she arrived from Indonesia to work as a live-in housemaid—Sinta glanced back at the kitchen for what she prayed was the final time.

The red-brick Colonial was just a block from Joyce Kilmer Middle School off Wolftrap Road. From the outside, there was little to distinguish it from its neighbors on the cul-de-sac. Occasionally someone would be out shoveling snow or getting the mail. But for the most part, the couple with two kids who lived inside kept to themselves. There was no outward sign of the secret that Sinta alleges lurked within.

In a federal civil lawsuit, and during in-person and written interviews that *Washingtonian* conducted with Sinta through her attorney, the former housemaid alleges that her boss—the owner of a Georgetown cafe who's also a pundit and political activist—was a modern-day slaver. This story is based on facts alleged by Sinta in her lawsuit and in the magazine's interviews with her.

Ordinarily at 5:30 AM on a Wednesday, Sinta* would be asleep in her tiny bedroom: a windowless storage closet under a staircase in the basement that was just large enough for a twin mattress and shelves for blankets and dishes. At 7, she would get dressed, put the kettle on, and carry a hot cup of water and honey up to her boss's bedside. Then she would steel herself for the day ahead: make breakfast, pack the children's lunches, do laundry, iron clothes, cook dinner, mop the kitchen floor, and finally, give her boss a massage.

To get through these 17-hour days, Sinta tried hard not to think about how her employer refused to pay her. About how she wasn't allowed to use the phone unsupervised or show her face outdoors alone. She did what she was told partly because, she says, her boss's father threatened that Americans were savages who would rape and shoot her if she dared escape.

But this wasn't a typical Wednesday morning. After seven months of living in captivity, Sinta had had enough. It was January 11, 2012. She was ready to flee.

Sinta had decided against sneaking out through the basement for fear of waking the cat, but otherwise she didn't have a plan. She had communicated with her boss exclusively in Arabic and didn't speak a word of English. She'd met few of the neighbors and says she'd so rarely been allowed out of the house without her employers that she had no clue where she was or where she might go.

Her boss had confiscated and hidden her passport months before, so packing that was out of the question. But what about the clothes she'd been given? They would surely come in handy, she thought, but then she decided to leave all of it behind. The last thing she needed was an angry boss shouting "theft" after she'd run off. Sinta stuffed her change of outfits, her Indonesian ID card, and a few other personal items inside a plastic grocery sack—that would have to do.

She made her way from the basement to the alarm system in the kitchen and held her breath as her fingers worked the buttons on the control panel her employers set every night. She had never touched it before. One false move and the whole family would wake to the wail of sirens.

SINTA AND HER FIVE siblings grew up poor in a two-bedroom concrete house in South Sumatra. Her father grew what little there was to eat and had a small cocoa crop he harvested for cash a few times each year. When Sinta was in third grade, her mother took a job as a cook in Saudi Arabia, leaving Sinta to run the house and raise her sisters. At 18 she, too, left for Saudi Arabia and the best job she could find: working as a maid.

Her boss was strict, and the job kept her on her feet six days a week for just $160 a month, but on her days off she was allowed to socialize with other servants. After two years, the contract ended and Sinta returned home, got married, and had a son. She helped care for her in-laws while her husband became a day laborer for less than $12 a week, well below the average wage in Indonesia at the time. For more than a decade, that was the family's main income.

Then in late 2009, Sinta says, she found herself with an unexpected opportunity: A cousin in New Jersey told her about a labor recruiter named Nura Ziadeh who helped Indonesian women find jobs as housemaids in America. The jobs paid $1,000 a month—enough for Sinta to start saving so she and her husband could build a home of their own in Indonesia. "I really needed the work," she says. "So I felt good about it."

There was a price attached, however. Sinta had to pay Ziadeh a service fee of $1,644 up front, according to her lawsuit, and she had to take five separate trips to Jakarta, 250 miles away, to fill out paperwork. The whole process cost her about $3,000—2½ times her annual family income. To come up with the cash, she borrowed the money from banks, thinking that with her new job she could quickly repay it.

It took many months, until finally, in the spring of 2011, Ziadeh found a suitable employer for Sinta: a wealthy military general working as a diplomat in the Washington area. Sinta says that she submitted her contract to the US consulate in Jakarta to work for "General Muhammed Al-Karsi" and that she received an A-3 diplomatic visa—meaning she could work only for that foreign official. Anything else and she'd be subject to immediate deportation.

On the day she left home, Sinta wiped the tears from her eight-year-old boy's eyes as she said goodbye, then drove to the airport with Ziadeh's adult son, Bobby, who was there to see her off, according to court papers. As they waited for her flight, his cell phone rang. He passed it to Sinta. "Are you the lady of the house?" Sinta asked the caller in Arabic. The woman

PHOTOGRAPH BY GREG KAHN

Like many Indonesians, Sinta has no surname. She asked that her first name be changed for this story out of concern for her family.

SECRET SLAVE

Photographed May 31 at her attorney's home, Sinta alleges that her boss's father tailed her as she worked 17-hour days and that he sometimes tried to force himself on her.

"JUST WHEN I WAS HOPING TO GO TO BED, SHE'D CALL ME TO HER ROOM" FOR A MASSAGE, SINTA SAYS. "IT WAS EXHAUSTING AFTER A VERY LONG DAY AND WAS THE HARDEST PART."

said yes but didn't introduce herself. She wanted to know what Sinta was wearing in order to spot her at the airport.

In her thin black pants and gray sweater, Sinta boarded the plane, nervous but excited. She was in her mid-thirties and already buried in debt because of the labor recruiting fees, but eager to work and provide for her family.

Nearly 30 hours later, she walked off the flight into Dulles Airport feeling anxious. She made her way through customs and toward the baggage claim, relieved to finally see a woman with dyed blond hair and a colorful blouse waving at her. The woman and a man—whom she introduced as "General Muhammed Al-Karsi"—led Sinta to a car in the parking lot.

"Where is your passport?" Sinta recalls the blond woman asking in Arabic.

Sinta passed it from the back seat, then watched as the woman tucked it into her purse and talked to the man for several minutes in English before the car rolled away from the airport. After about an hour, they pulled off the road and the woman told Sinta to follow her into another car. From there, the two drove to the woman's home in Vienna. Sinta didn't know it at the time, but she had just been delivered into bondage.

CROSS CULTURES
Farah Atassi, Sinta's alleged slaver, was born in Syria and moved to the US to work at a conservative think tank. Atassi is shown at home in 2012.

"I'M JUST A HUMBLE U.S. CITIZEN TRYING TO BRIDGE CULTURES AND BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER," FARAH ATASSI SAYS.

AS SOON AS THEY arrived at the house, the woman led Sinta inside and forced her to hand over her Indonesian identity card, her immigration departure card, and her address book full of contacts back home and in New Jersey. Sinta had no idea what was happening: Where was the general who was supposed to be her boss? Who was this woman?

All she knew at first was what her predecessor, still working in the home, told her: that she should prepare herself for months of low pay, harsh treatment, and broken promises. The maid had apparently lived there several years, Sinta says, and was finally being allowed to return home to Indonesia. "She encouraged me to run away," Sinta says, "but at that point I didn't know anyone or what to do, so I just stayed."

Sinta's day started at 7 AM, and she usually worked until almost midnight, seven days a week. There were four bedrooms and five bathrooms to keep up with and seven mouths to feed: Sinta's boss, her husband, and their children, ages 10 and 11, plus the woman's parents and brother.

Cooking, cleaning, mopping, vacuuming, feeding the family's cat and two bunnies—every day the same routine. Although the kitchen had a dishwasher, the family complained that it wasted electricity and water, Sinta says, so she had to scrub each glass and dish by hand, causing her hands to dry and crack.

Sinta also washed windows, polished shoes, organized the woman's closet, and hand-washed her delicates. Late every night, she'd have to do the massage—from shoulder to toe, for up to an hour. "Just when I was hoping to go to bed, she'd call

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARCO SCOZZARO

me to her room," Sinta says. "It was exhausting after a very long day and was the hardest part."

Even though she was spent, Sinta had trouble falling asleep at night. She'd lie awake in her storage closet worrying about her son, her debts, her predicament, fighting back tears.

Sometimes the psychological pressure of having to be invisible felt just as punishing as the manual labor. At first, the family allowed her to walk the kids to the school-bus stop two blocks away or fetch the mail without supervision, she says. But they soon stopped letting her out on her own. On the rare occasions they did send her to the mailbox, she says, she saw them spying on her through the front windows.

When they made her clean the cars, she was allowed to do so only in the garage, away from the gaze of neighbors. Sometimes the woman would take Sinta to her cafe near the Georgetown waterfront, where Sinta would have to dust and clean her employer's offices—out of customers' sight.

Someone was nearly always home, as if to keep an eye on her. She couldn't use the phone without a family member standing beside her and was permitted to call her husband and son only a handful of times for about five minutes apiece over seven months.

On several occasions, Sinta says, she overheard the woman and her mother discussing a previous maid who had tried to run away years before. Sinta believed they were paranoid she would do the same.

The woman's father got into the habit of following her around the house as she worked, she says, trying to hug and kiss her if he found her alone. She says she pushed him away but he grew increasingly aggressive, sneaking into her room in the middle of the night to stroke her body and press down on her while kissing her by force.

"The longer I stayed," Sinta says, "the more frequent his advances became. I tried to mention it to [the woman's husband], but he didn't do anything."

The woman's mother also trailed after her, barking criticisms while she worked, Sinta says. One day, she carried an apple into her room to save as a snack. Later, Sinta says, the mother inspected her room as she often did, discovered the fruit, and erupted.

By then, eating had become another source of stress. The family watched closely over the food, counting all the fruit and bread and commenting on how quickly it went. Though Sinta generally cooked one hot meal a day for the family, she rarely felt comfortable helping herself. She typically ate toast in the morning and instant noodles in the afternoon if she had time. For dinner, the family allowed her to eat only leftovers, if there were any. In seven months, Sinta lost 27 pounds.

THE THOUGHT OF RUNNING away terrified her at first, particularly as she came to understand that her boss was not a nobody—she was someone with influence.

The woman's father began bragging to Sinta about his successful daughter and pointing out any time she was quoted in the news. Whenever she appeared on TV, he'd pull Sinta away from her chores and make her watch the segment. Gradually she began to realize her boss was no ordinary working mother of two: She was a high-profile figure in DC and the Middle East, a Syrian-born pundit and Arab friend to US conservatives, named Farah Atassi.*

Atassi had moved to America in 1999 after college to be the first Middle East scholar at a Michigan think tank named for Russell Kirk, considered one of the founding fathers of the conservative movement. The daughter of a politically prominent family in Homs, she made fast friends with Kirk's widow, according to the *Washington Times*, and began hobnobbing with other right-wingers, drawn to the positions they shared with Muslims on issues such as abortion. A short time later, she moved to DC and married Charif Khanji, a Lebanese-American with a PhD in computer science.

After 9/11, Atassi was looking for ways to bridge the cultural gap between Arabs and Americans. In 2002, she founded a company to do translation, public relations, and marketing for Arab and US businesses. Six years later, she and her husband opened Zenobia Lounge in Georgetown. The cozy cafe and bookstore has a hookah bar and doubles as the Arab Information and Resource Center, where Atassi tries to educate visitors about Middle Eastern culture.

Photos of Atassi with political bigwigs ranging from former senator Richard Lugar of Indiana to Prince Faisal of Saudi Arabia once covered the walls, according to the *Washington Times*. Until recently, numerous shots on her website showed her schmoozing with the likes of Madeleine Albright, Sandra Day O'Connor, and Tony Blair. (The site appears to have been taken down.)

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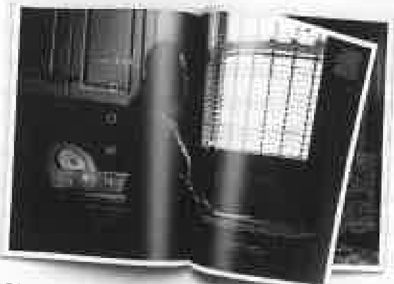
NEWSMAKER

Atassi, an opponent of the al-Assad regime, wants better treatment for Syrian women. At left, with members of the Syrian National Coalition; above, on "Piers Morgan Live" speaking against the regime last year.

PHOTOGRAPH OF SYRIAN NATIONAL COALITION BY AFP/NEWSCOM; CNN APPEARANCE COURTESY OF CNN

*She goes by the name Farah Atassi as well as Farah Al Atassi.

THE SLAVE DOWN THE STREET



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In recent years, Atassi has become an outspoken critic of the al-Assad regime in Syria. She's a member of the Syrian National Coalition, the political party of Syrian rebels who are fighting Assad, and she supports American-led strikes to end the conflicts, pushing her agenda as a commentator on CNN, ABC, the BBC, and Arabic television. Last September, as the US was weighing whether to attack the Syrian army in retaliation for gassing its own citizens with chemical weapons, Atassi went on *Piers Morgan Live* on behalf of the rebel forces and publicly demanded an apology from the *New York Times* after it wrote about the violent side of Assad's opposition.

Women's rights have been a part of Atassi's agenda. She has touted her membership in professional groups such as the Syrian American Women's Association and the National Association of Female Executives and has told the federally funded United States Institute of Peace that women are "paying the highest price" in the current conflict. Last fall, after a boat carrying Syrian refugees capsized in the Mediterranean Sea, she tweeted: "Shame on humanity! Shame on z int. community watching z Syrian tragedy; Women & children r drowning in z sea." And later: "Save Syrian women and children from cold death."

Asked about Sinta's allegations and the federal civil lawsuit that Sinta filed accusing Atassi and her husband of trafficking, forced labor, and false imprisonment, Atassi declined to comment other than to deny ever having a maid and to say: "I'm just a humble US citizen trying to bridge cultures and bring people together." The couple's attorney, Haig Kalbian—who has represented a number of wealthy clients from the Middle East—told *Washingtonian*, "The allegations are spurious, and we plan to vigorously defend the case."

BECAUSE SHE DIDN'T SPEAK ENGLISH, Sinta didn't know the nature of Atassi's punditry. She had no idea that in public Atassi was campaigning for some of the most vulnerable people in her culture. In private, Sinta says, Atassi was doing the opposite. She wasn't even paying her housemaid.

After working for three months without receiving a cent, Sinta says, she asked Atassi when she could expect to get the $1,000 a month stated in her contract. "Are you crazy? I don't even make $1,000 a month," Sinta says her boss told her. Over seven months, according to Sinta's lawsuit, Atassi wired a total of only $2,000 to Sinta's family. She dismissed the maid's contract with "General Muhammed Al-Karsi" as a mere formality.

Not long after being rebuffed, Sinta ditched any hope of saving up to buy her family a new house and decided she just wanted to return to Indonesia debt-free. But how? Atassi's father kept reminding her that his daughter had powerful political connections—Sinta feared that if she tried to escape, Atassi might use those connections to find her or hurt her family. "I was too scared to do or say anything," she says.

That began to change in the fall of 2011 when she says she and Atassi's mother walked the kids to school one morning, a rare occurrence.

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"I spotted a woman walking on the street wearing a head scarf," Sinta explains. "She looked Indonesian to me, and I was so surprised and happy to see her that I exclaimed out loud, 'She's Indonesian!?' The woman started to respond to me, motioning like she was going to respond affirmatively, but before I could engage any further with her, [Atassi's mother] grabbed my arm and pulled me away."

Sinta couldn't get the woman off her mind over the next few weeks. "This gave me a glimmer of hope that if I ran away, I would be able to find other people that would understand me," she says.

A month or so later, around New Year's Eve, Atassi and her husband took the children to Florida and left Sinta alone with Atassi's parents. Sinta waited for a moment when no one was watching and searched the home. She found her Indonesian ID and departure card, which Atassi had confiscated the day she arrived. It was a first step toward a getaway—now she just needed to work up the courage to go through with it.

A week later, Atassi's mother exploded. The woman was upset that Sinta hadn't prepped food for an upcoming family wedding and yelled at the maid while throwing things around the kitchen. The following day, Atassi also came down on her, warning that she was lucky to have a job at all.

Sinta begged to be sent home. She could leave, she recalls Atassi's father telling her—but only in another 18 months, after she'd earned enough for the plane fare.

Sinta made up her mind. She was going to run away.

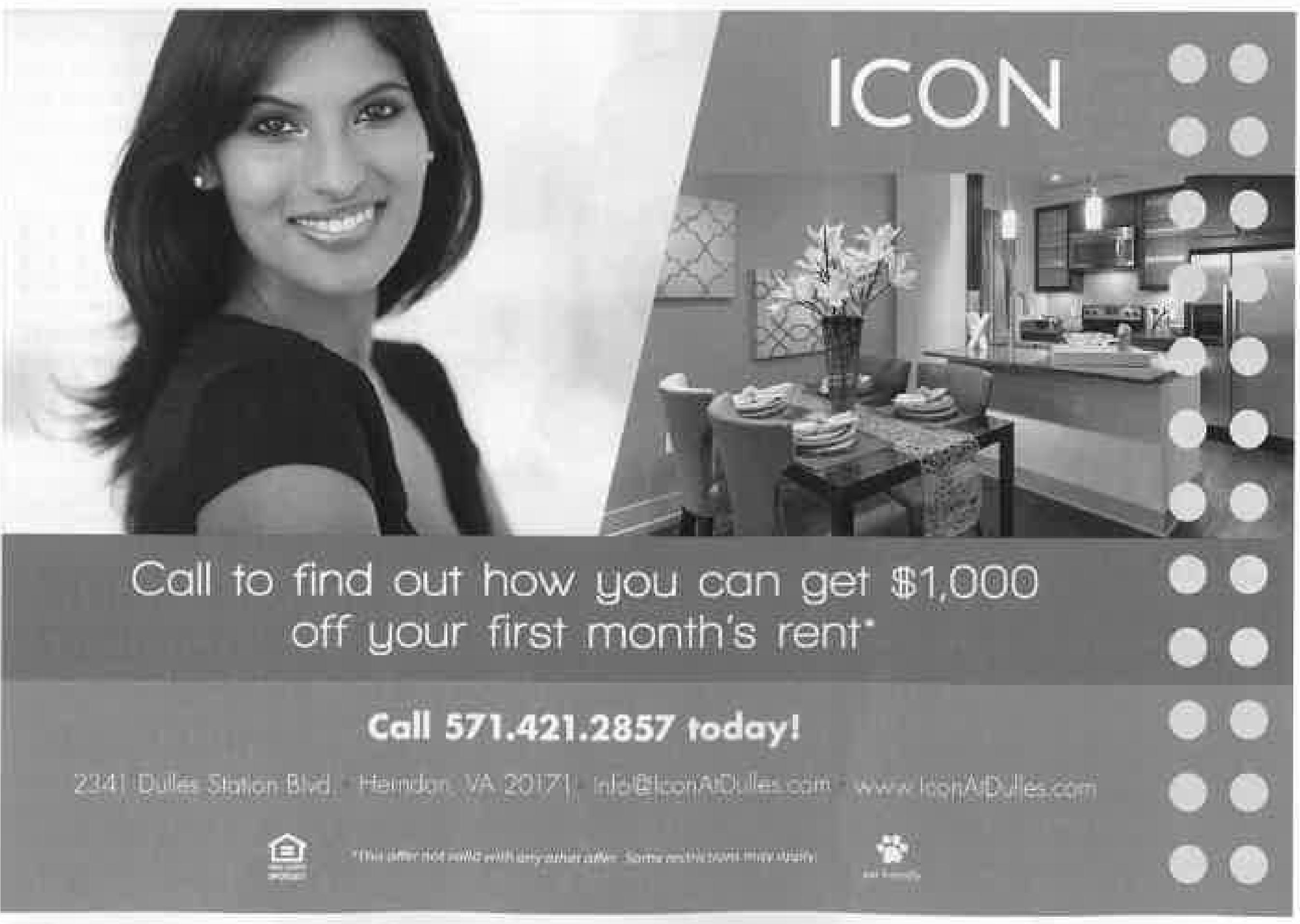
"The scam was shocking, the most fraudulent abuse of the visas I've seen."

SINTA HAD NO WAY OF KNOWING IT at the time, but while she was plotting her escape, Assistant US Attorney Daryl Bloom was trying to track down dozens of Indonesian women just like her. The prosecutor in Pennsylvania was chasing one of the largest cases in recent history involving trafficking allegations, and his target was none other than the woman who had allegedly sold Sinta into bondage: Nura Ziadeh.

The investigation had started in 2006 when diplomatic security agents at the State Department flagged a pile of A-3 visa applications in Jakarta that looked suspiciously identical. Unknown to most people until last December, A-3 visas made national headlines after former deputy consul general of India Devyani Khobragade was arrested for visa fraud and lying to State to get her Indian nanny into the US on an A-3. The visas are reserved for personal employees of diplomats, who must be paid at least the minimum wage. Khobragade's employee accused her boss of paying her $3.31 an hour—far less than the $9.75 hourly wage stated in the contract filed with the US government.

After Ziadeh's name was floated to investigators in connection with the pile of A-3s, according to Bloom, they began looking into her. Four years into the probe, they raided Ziadeh's home and found about 75 pieces of luggage from women who had been recruited from abroad—plus roughly a dozen passports and more than a hundred photocopied passports, court records show. They also found several foreign women inside the house whom Ziadeh had kept as housekeepers.

In all, the government estimated that Ziadeh recruited and brought more than



100 women into America on fraudulent A-3 visas over a ten-year period, according to court papers. "The scam was shocking," says Martina Vandenberg, head of the Human Trafficking Pro Bono Legal Center in DC. "This is the biggest fraudulent abuse of the A-3 system I have ever seen."

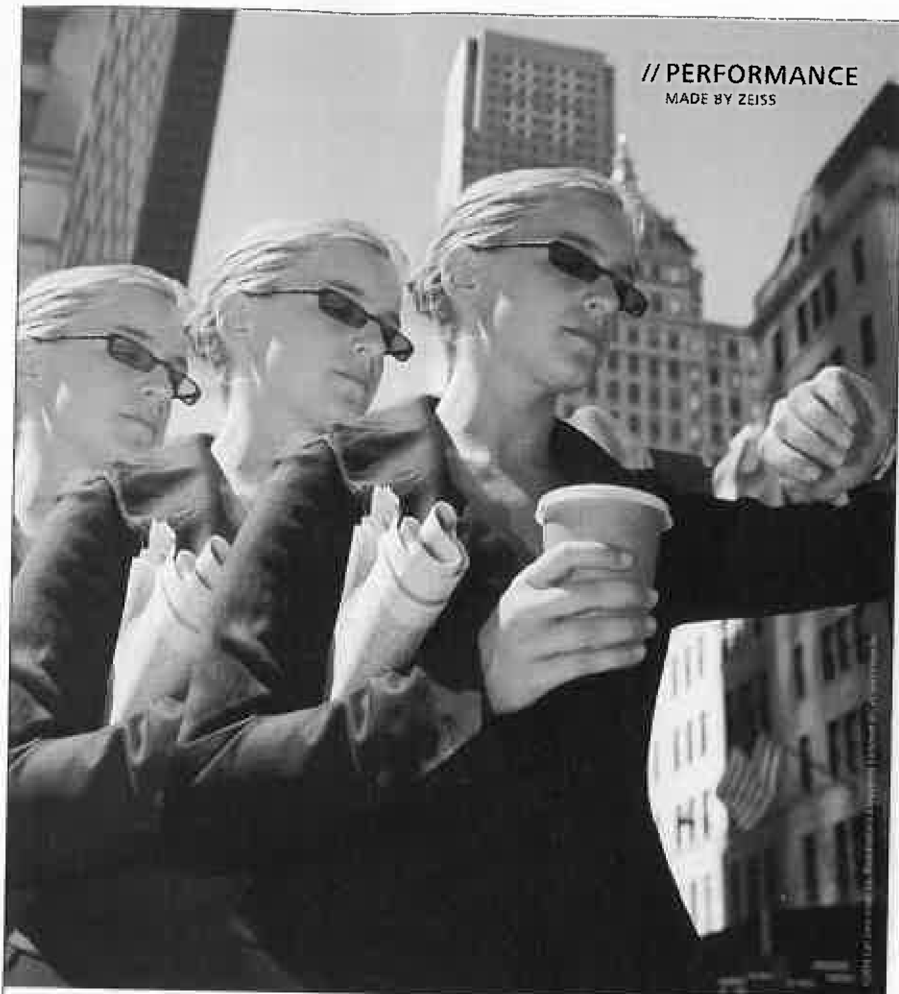
Ziadeh, a fragile-looking 63-year-old, was born in Cairo but lived for many years in Indonesia. She moved to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in 2000 for her husband's job and a couple of years later launched a business bringing Indonesian women into the US to work as housemaids. Her scheme was fairly simple, Bloom says: She identified diplomats in America looking to hire servants through the A-3 visa program. Then Ziadeh's family in Jakarta advertised and visited villages to recruit women willing to pay for the opportunity, Bloom says.

Sometimes the women legitimately worked for their diplomatic sponsor, but others were immediately placed with private families even though that was forbidden under A-3 rules, court papers show. In some instances, the employers treated their maids well, but many did not, refusing to pay minimum wage and physically abusing them, Bloom says. Several servants, he adds, were paid as little as $150 a month.

It's hard to imagine how you'd find an off-the-books housemaid broker. Ziadeh's clients did it through a sprawling word-of-mouth network that extended from San Diego to New York, according to Bloom. All the clients spoke Arabic and were foreign-born, though many had become US citizens. They were bankers and doctors, successful professionals, says Bloom. Ziadeh promised maids at low wages, telling some clients that after giving her an $8,000 up-front fee, they didn't need to pay their servant a regular wage.

Federal agents searched for Ziadeh's victims for months, but in the end they located only a dozen. Bloom says they believe many more are scattered across the US, completely off the grid and in violation of their visas. Only now are the runaways like Sinta emerging and filing lawsuits.

In most domestic trafficking cases, victims' lawyers will try to contact the State Department and federal law enforcement. If agents can see evidence of a crime, they'll open a case against an alleged slaver. But criminal charges aren't necessary for a victim to seek justice in civil court. Under federal law, civil attorneys are allowed to sue for damages using the same slavery and trafficking charges that criminal pros-



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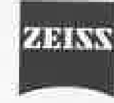

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ecutors might otherwise handle. Over the past ten years, there have been 23 federal lawsuits filed by domestic servants who entered the country on diplomatic visas such as the A-3 and who are alleging trafficking, Vandenberg says.

The burden of proof is significantly lower in civil court than it is in a criminal setting, and Vandenberg says trafficked workers have fared remarkably well—collecting anywhere from the high six figures to well over $1 million from their abusers. "It's not hard to win these cases," she says, "because the [victims] are so compelling and sympathetic."

Prosecutors indicted Ziadeh in February 2012 on five counts of harboring an illegal alien, and she pleaded guilty to every count. When the judge announced her sentence in November 2013, she collapsed onto the floor. Family members wept and yelled as deputy marshals kept them from rushing to Ziadeh's side while medics worked to stabilize her spiking blood pressure. She's now serving 15 months in a federal prison.

As for the diplomats who signed the A-3 visas Ziadeh used to traffic her victims, there will be no justice. Bloom, the prosecutor, says he never pursued cases against any officials, figuring there would have been too much red tape involved.

Sinta's attorneys contacted Bloom and offered to have Sinta testify against Ziadeh, but by then the woman's prosecution was well under way. Bloom already had five confirmed victims; he didn't need Sinta to make his case. Her only recourse against Ziadeh, her attorneys say, was to give a victim impact statement to the court detailing her captivity and the day she tried to escape.

THAT MORNING, SINTA WATCHED THE alarm system's control panel and exhaled as it disengaged. (Her attorneys won't say how she'd learned to disarm it.) She spotted cash sitting on a table but left it behind and opened the front door.

Outside, a blast of cold air stung her cheeks and ice covered the steep front steps. Sinta slipped on the way down, dropping her bag and spilling her few belongings. Terrified of rousing the family, she grabbed her things and hurried in the direction where she thought she had seen the Indonesian woman some weeks back. It was dark, and the sun wouldn't be up for two hours. This was January. When cars passed and shone their lights on her shivering frame, she was afraid they might

be Atassi or her family trying to catch her.

Sinta kept on the run for hours, meandering through neighborhoods and nearby woods. It was the first time she'd been outside the home alone, and she worried she was going in circles. Finally, she heard someone making noise in a garage and knocked on the door, but nobody answered, so she moved on. She passed one dark home after another and kept going.

At about 8 AM, she saw a house with a light on. A woman came to the door. To Sinta's amazement, the woman spoke Malaysian, which is similar to Indonesian. She took Sinta into the kitchen, fed her breakfast, and asked her to tell her story. "It was the first time someone had actually listened to me," Sinta says. "It was the first time I felt momentarily safe."

Atassi said, "Are you crazy? I don't even make $1,000 a month."

Later that morning, the friendly stranger, a Malaysian, handed Sinta a phone so she could call her cousin in New Jersey. No one answered. Sinta dialed Ziadeh, in Harrisburg, who was six weeks away from being indicted. "She was short with me on the phone," Sinta says, "and told me, 'I've gotten in trouble with the law and you can't call me anymore. Go to the embassy.'"

Sinta spent the night at the Malaysian woman's home and was later taken to the Indonesian Embassy. She found a place to stay through the local Indonesian community, and nine months later she landed a job. (She won't say doing what.)

Agatha Schmaedick of the Asian Pacific American Legal Resource Center was working at her desk in April 2013 when Sinta walked into the office. She was immediately embarrassed in front of Schmaedick and cried several times, but she pulled herself together and explained the seven months she'd spent as a secret slave in Vienna.

Schmaedick had spent about six years in Indonesia and was familiar with the way poor women were often recruited for jobs abroad and then abused. "I was appalled," Schmaedick says. "Appalled, disgusted, and astonished. Though I have heard stories like hers many times, it still shocks my conscience."

Schmaedick and her co-counsel, Daniel Katz, say they repeatedly tried to get law enforcement involved. They called federal prosecutors in DC and Northern Virginia as well as US Immigration and Customs Enforcement and asked agents to interview Sinta, hoping that would lead to a criminal prosecution. But no one has taken the case, Schmaedick says. "It was really frustrating," she adds, "but I'm still hoping that criminal charges will be brought."

Schmaedick and Katz turned to the federal civil court in DC. To make sure Atassi was the right woman, the lawyers showed Sinta numerous photos of Atassi from the internet—Sinta identified them without hesitation. Schmaedick also drove her to the Georgetown waterfront and to Atassi's neighborhood in Vienna, where Sinta correctly pointed out Zenobia Lounge and Atassi's home.

The case may take a while to sort out. The State Department has Sinta's A-3 visa on file, complete with her original employment contract, Schmaedick says, but Sinta never received a copy, so Schmaedick has requested it under public-records laws; the request could take as long as a year. The Malaysian woman who helped Sinta right after she escaped used to work at the Malaysian Embassy in DC, Schmaedick says, but has left the US and Schmaedick hasn't been able to find her.

Like so many allegations of domestic abuse, the case may boil down to a matter of she said/she said—in this case the word of a poor immigrant versus that of the well-off and politically connected.

Sinta is in a much better place now, three years after arriving in the US and two years after escaping her alleged red-brick prison in the Virginia suburbs. She paid off her creditors in Jakarta. She's debt-free.

Yet she can't shake the regret of leaving Indonesia and her son, the regret of coming to America.

"In many ways," she says, "the low point for me came after I fled, with all the anxiety of going home a failure and being a burden on my family. I had always thought America was a country of laws, where one could make a decent salary and not worry about being paid. But I was wrong, and now I worry I will go home worse off than when I left, with nothing to show for all my hard work."

Washington native Chris Vogel (contact@chrisvogel.com) is a contributing editor at Boston magazine.