

University of Queensland law graduate Melinda Taylor (in The Hague on Dec. 19) landed a job at the International Criminal Court at age 22. "It was incredibly exciting," she tells WHO.



Taylor (middle) with fellow Australian-human rights lawyer Jennifer Robinson and Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón during a 2016 press conference with Assange.



After losing his latest bid to have his UK arrest warrant thrown out, Assange (on May 19 last year) has not indicated whether he will appeal.

PRISON NIGHTMARE

In 2012, Taylor was detained with colleagues in Libya on spy charges. In a lighter moment, she and her fellow prisoners watched the prison escape movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. "I did watch it thinking, 'I wonder if we could do that?'" she says.

MY FIGHT FOR Assange

Meet Julian Assange's new lawyer—a 'Brissie girl' who defends some of the world's most controversial people

Brisbane-born human rights lawyer Melinda Taylor was on the phone with arguably her most-famous client earlier this year, when a flock of seagulls began cawing outside her window. Taylor was in her seaside office in The Hague, Netherlands, and at the sound of the birds her client, exiled WikiLeaks chief Julian Assange, perked up. "He was like, 'Oh, seagulls!'" recalls Taylor, 42, a defence lawyer at the International Criminal Court. "He sounded so wistful because he hadn't seen or heard seagulls for so long."

Many argue that is Assange's choice. Wanted on sexual-assault allegations in Sweden in 2012, the WikiLeaks editor sought refuge inside the Ecuadorian embassy in London where he has stayed now for nearly six years. Though Swedish authorities have since dropped their case, Assange, 46, is still wanted on a UK arrest warrant for skipping bail.

But Taylor, the daughter of a teacher and lawyer, who grew up in Brisbane playing netball and surf-lifesaving on the Gold Coast's North Burleigh beach before becoming one of the world's most respected human-rights lawyers, says Assange has no choice but to stay put. Before he leaves the embassy Assange wants assurances the UK won't extradite him to the US, where he faces possible espionage charges for leaking classified material. Taylor, a married mum of two who spent 26 harrowing days in a Libyan jail in 2012 while defending a client, spoke to WHO from The Hague.

What are Julian's living conditions like?

He's still living in one room. It's the same as it has always been. But obviously it gets worse as time continues. It's tantamount to a form of mental torture because you never know when you're going to be released. No one has given him an end date. He's a strong character but obviously it has a toll. For example, he can't obtain medical treatment. **In February a judge rejected his request to have his UK arrest warrant dropped—and dismissed his health problems: depression, "frozen" shoulder and a sore tooth. Does Julian need medical treatment?**

It's something his lawyers have been asking for, for years, just to allow him to go to a hospital. It's such a small request and such a fundamental right. His circumstances are in many regards worse than in prison. **What does he do all day?**

He works. He is someone who deals with the difficulties by trying to be as productive as possible. He is someone who is, in a way, extremely courageous, because he could have just backed out and said, "It's OK. We'll close shop. I don't want to antagonise anyone else." But he hasn't. WikiLeaks continues to publish without fear or favour. **You've represented and advised some controversial figures including Serbian president Slobodan Milošević and Saif Gaddafi—the son of late Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan revolutionist. What attracts you to these cases?**

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, [lawyer] Atticus Finch tells his daughter, Scout, that "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... " So if I met someone accused of horrible crimes, I would suspend judgment, listen to them

and try to see things through their eyes—because that is what the presumption of innocence requires, and that is what is fair.

In 2012, you and three colleagues spent 26 days in jail on suspicion of spying when you were defending Gaddafi. Can you describe that experience?

It's not always easy for me to talk about it. It's a silver lining in a sense that, although it was a horrible and traumatic experience, it was interesting to know what it was like to be illegally detained because it gives you a real appreciation of what it's like and how vulnerable you feel, how frustrated, how dependent. We could not go outside the entire time and we were desperate. We were

begging them: "We'll wash your cars, we'll do any job you want." Prison is not just the four walls, it's everything else. It's not what you can do, it's what you can't do that defines your life. Yet people, for example in Julian's case, really deride that. They're like, "Oh, he's fine. He's in an

embassy next to Harrods." No: he's detained. And his conditions are particularly traumatic because a normal detainee has access to one hour of sunlight. It's a basic UN right that's protected throughout all prisons. Julian doesn't even have that.

With the arrest warrant still standing, what's Assange's next move?

Hopefully, out of the embassy! Ultimately, the British legal system has the commitment to fair process, to fair principles. It seems that some people don't like Julian and I disagree with their reasons for not liking him, but at the end of the day that's not relevant. He is a person with rights and the legal system has to uphold those rights.

■ Reported by Phil Boucher

"It was a horrible and traumatic experience"

—Melinda Taylor

FROM LEFT: SERGEY PONOMAREV/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX/HEADPRESS; GETTY IMAGES (2); NEWSPIX