



U.S.

Woman Breaks Through Chains of Forced Marriage, and Helps Others Do the Same

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On Religion

By **SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN**

NEWARK — One day in March 2011, Fraidy Reiss went to her lawyer’s office to close on a house. The prosaic routine of paperwork somehow diminished her sense of accomplishment. Not even the seller was present to hear what she yearned to say.

She was only buying a Cape Cod on a small patch of lawn in a blue-collar neighborhood in New Jersey. Yet she and her two daughters had already named the place “Palais de Triomphe,” palace of triumph. The house symbolized her liberation from an arranged marriage, threats of violence at the hands of her estranged husband, and indeed the entire insular community of stringently Orthodox Jews among whom she had spent her entire life.

In that moment of emancipation, Ms. Reiss also felt the sudden, unbidden summons of obligation. “The house meant that I’ve gotten to the other side,” she recalled. “I wanted to do something to give back. I wanted to use my pain to help others in the same situation. And, selfishly, I thought that would help me heal.”

Four years later, on a blustery morning early this month, Ms. Reiss, 40, stood in a classroom at Rutgers University in Newark telling her story to three dozen lawyers. She spoke with well-practiced pacing and emphasis —

childhood in Brooklyn, coerced betrothal in her teens to a man she barely knew, and then the harassment and stalking and death threats, all of it documented in court papers. Finally, there was college and therapy and, after 15 years of marriage, divorce.

Ms. Reiss spoke with a very specific purpose. The lawyers were attending a continuing education course sponsored by *Unchained at Last*, the nonprofit group that she founded four years ago to help women extricate themselves from arranged marriages. Her hope was that some of the lawyers would be moved to represent *Unchained at Last*'s clients without charge.

"It's a moral imperative," said Katherine Francis, a corporate lawyer from the Trenton area, after Ms. Reiss's presentation. "I hadn't even planned to be here, but you know how you start a Google search and wander? And all of a sudden I saw this class and thought, 'Hmm, there's the universe talking.'"

Unchained at Last operates in the contested crossroad between the modern secular concept of marriage for love between consenting adults and longstanding ethnic or communal customs of arranged marriage. Religion does not require such marriage, but is very often invoked to provide moral justification for it. And the laws of certain faiths, Orthodox Judaism in particular, give a husband the sole right to grant a divorce.

A reliable estimate of arranged marriages is difficult because the definition is inexact. But the Tahirih Justice Center, an advocacy group for immigrant women, reported that about 3,000 cases of "forced marriage" took place in the United States from 2009 through 2011.

Almost all of the 90 women whom *Unchained at Last* has helped had been pressured into marriage by their religious community: Orthodox Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Mormon, Unification Church. Most lived in the New York area, though one was in Arizona. The women's nations of origin stretch through Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.

On a basic level, *Unchained at Last* provides legal services because most of the women's cases involve divorce and child custody litigation, and some extend into immigration status and restraining orders against a violent spouse. Because the clients' situations can be so catastrophic — forced at gunpoint to

accept a marriage, raped by a husband, essentially imprisoned within the home as a domestic servant — Unchained at Last also provides mentoring, access to therapy and cash stipends for everything from basic clothing to English as a second language class.

Ms. Reiss's earliest collaborator was Shehnaz Abdeljaber, a Rutgers classmate of Palestinian Muslim ancestry. In their barrier-crossing friendship, the women discovered a common bond. Ms. Abdeljaber had been pushed by her parents into an engagement to a young man from her extended family whom she had never met. Though she managed to break off the engagement, the broader issue intrigued her.

“From the day I met Fraidy, I knew she was going to be part of my life,” Ms. Abdeljaber wrote in an email. “Little did I know that we weren't going to be just friends. We became sisters, family and partners with her vision.”

In early 2011, Unchained at Last incorporated in New Jersey. Ms. Abdeljaber became the first president of the group's board, which also included a Hindu woman, Kavitha Rajagopalan.

The annual budget back then came to barely \$20,000, most of it from Ms. Reiss's pocket. By now, Unchained at Last has a \$3.4 million budget, with about \$200,000 in donations from individuals and foundations and \$3.2 million in free services from participating lawyers. In her own life, Ms. Reiss has become an atheist, and, after several years as a journalist, she became a private investigator.

Most clients find the group through word-of-mouth. At the outset, Ms. Reiss said, the organization struggled to find enough volunteer lawyers. Child-custody litigation is particularly difficult. Religious communities have been successful at times in turning out large numbers to paint Unchained's client as an “unfit mother” because she has left the theological corral.

That has not deterred Ms. Reiss. Unchained at Last successfully lobbied in the New Jersey State Legislature last year for a law easing crime victims' access to court records. This week, Ms. Reiss took part in an initial planning session held by the White House Council on Women and Girls to develop a national policy on forced marriage.

Even in its more sophisticated form, though, *Unchained at Last* has retained the personal touch of what the Rev. Henri Nouwen, writing about ministry, called the “wounded healer.” Ditty Weiss, for one, experienced it.

After 10 years in an abusive marriage, Ms. Weiss decided to risk leaving both her husband and their fervently Orthodox community. The only problem was that she had no idea who could help her. In a sort of desperate whim, Ms. Weiss sent an email to Deborah Feldman, the author of an acclaimed memoir, “*Unorthodox*,” about her rejection of the Satmar Hasidic sect in which she had grown up.

Ms. Feldman steered Ms. Weiss to Ms. Reiss, who soon lined up two volunteer lawyers from a prominent Manhattan firm. When Ms. Weiss needed cancer surgery, Ms. Reiss babysat for her children. And as Ms. Weiss underwent chemotherapy, *Unchained at Last* gave her money to hire an au pair and a buy a used car.

“I cannot even describe,” Ms. Weiss recalled, “what it’s like to have an angel sweep down and kiss you on the forehead and then hold your hand and tell you, ‘I’m not letting go until you’re O.K.’ ”

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