



Rights Now

The newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee



Two Who Defied Hate: The Story of Martha And Waitstill Sharp

Watch the PBS Special Tuesday, September 20, 9:00 p.m. Eastern Time

By Tom Martorelli

They left their children behind in Wellesley, Massachusetts, to rescue people they had never met in Europe as World War II began. Risking arrest and worse at the hands of the Nazis, they operated in secret to help Jews, dissidents, and children escape from Czechoslovakia before the war – she managed the details in Prague while he traveled the continent raising money to fund their efforts. And then, with war

declared and the Germans closing in, they escaped on the Queen Mary to New York, through seas patrolled by U-Boats intent on sinking the pride of England's commercial fleet. They returned to their congregation and their children in Wellesley, safe at home after saving hundreds of people.

And then they went back.

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The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee advances human rights and social justice around the world, partnering with those who confront unjust power structures and mobilizing to challenge oppressive policies.

Rights Now

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We Welcome Letters

Rights Now is grateful to readers for their interest and support. We invite you to share your questions and comments by submitting a letter to the editor:

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Defying Hate

A message from UUSC's president



It's fitting that my first letter to *Rights Now* readers introduces an edition dedicated to defying hate. And it's an honor to mark the occasion of the September 20 PBS special about Waitstill and Martha Sharp, the two individuals who began UUSC's legacy of defying hate in 1939.

When I watch their story, I'm struck by the scenes of parents willingly putting their children on airplanes to fly them into the hands of strangers to escape war-torn Europe. It is almost impossible to imagine conditions so horrible that the best hope for your children is to put them into the hands of total strangers and send them to a foreign land.

Today, we want to believe these are stories from a distant past, but they are repeated every day. In Syria, and Central America, parents are bringing their children into the hands of strangers to keep them safe from war, violence, and danger. But instead of the welcoming arms they dream will protect them, countries in Europe detain them in camps, and in the United States, they wind up in "detention centers," with no rights or even an understanding of why they're there.

I just returned from a visit to one of the U.S. family detention centers, where I met a young girl celebrating her sixth birthday. Her mother told me this is her second birthday spent in a detention center.

It's a crime. But it's not the only challenge for those of us determined to defy hate. In Africa, LGBTQ people are under vicious attack by repressive governments and religious extremists just for being who they are. Under a new law, the Dominican Republic is deporting people of Haitian descent – even though they have never lived anywhere else. And in the United States, the killing of black people by police, followed by murders police officers themselves, remind us how hard we must work to defy hate, even at home.

And so I invite you: join us in our work. Act to defy hate in your community. Support UUSC and our partners throughout the world. Make Guest at Your Table an opportunity to defy hate at home. There's much to be done. As we read about the Sharps and others fighting injustice, we are reminded of the phrase, "never again." I am so inspired by the courage and tenacity of the Sharps and so many others who have sacrificed all to defy hate. Let us join them through our relentless action to defend and promote the rights and dignity of all people.

Tom Andrews

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Andrews". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

On Tuesday, September 20, PBS will air *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War*, a documentary directed by Ken Burns and Artemis Joukowski, the Sharps' grandson. Based on the letters Waitstill and Martha wrote to each other through both parts of their dangerous two-year mission, it tells the story of two of UUSC's founders in riveting personal detail. They invented codes for the records they kept to avoid being discovered when their homes were raided and searched. They created false travel documents for some of the people they rescued to help them get past border guards. They kept moving west as the Nazi blitzkrieg rolled through Poland, Belgium, and France.

And perhaps most difficult of all, they arranged for parents to send their children away from home and into the hands of strangers in order to keep them safe, knowing that for many of these families, it would be the last time they ever saw each other.

It was difficult, heartbreaking work that could easily have cost the Waitstills their own lives. As director Ken Burns says, "they did things that weren't taught in divinity school."

Martha and Waitstill Sharp sacrificed much to defy the hate spreading over Europe in those terrible two years. Like many of the people they helped, they trusted others to care for their own children while they risked everything



Martha and Waitstill Sharp

to fulfill their mission. In the end, they couldn't save everyone, but they did everything possible to rescue many people from Nazi concentration camps.

Their story is an inspiring reminder that for those of us who remember the holocaust and commit to "never again," there are always people before us who said, "not now."

Tom Martorelli is UUSC's writer and editor.

To learn more about the Sharps' story and how it can inspire all of us to continue their mission today, the UUA, UUSC, and the Fahs Collaborative at

Meadville Lombard Theological School have collaborated in creating the Defying the Nazis UU Action Project. The project includes a "#WeDefy" action guide with resources including the an interfaith discussion guide and UUSC's refugee advocacy toolkit. The action guide and other resources can be found at uua.org/action/defying-nazis-sharp-story.

On the weekend of September 23 through 25, following the screening of Defying the Nazis on PBS, UUSC is organizing a Defying Hate Preach-In at religious communities nationwide. Check with your minister or faith leader for more details.



"Times were so desperate, people were thankful if they could get their children onto the transports. I do remember at the airport, my mother was walking up and down with my sister, arm in arm, pensively. And then we had our last meal, and my father took photographs. They thought one of us might escape and come to England. My mother and the rest of my family didn't survive."

Gerda Mayer, who fled Prague on March 14, 1939



Stop Preaching Hate: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) Rights in Africa

By Jillian Tuck

Sexual minorities in Africa are among the most marginalized populations in the world; institutions that ought to be protecting their rights – governments and churches – actively persecute people in the LGBTQ community. Worse, they are also subject to violent attacks that too often go unpunished.

Defying this kind of hate is a large and difficult challenge. On her return from a recent fact-finding visit to Southern Africa, Jillian Tuck, UUSC Senior Program Leader for Rights at Risk, noted, “...trying to shift deeply entrenched attitudes of religious institutions is not a one-year project; it’s not a ten-year project. This is work that takes a generation to see tangible results, as one layer of homophobia is peeled off at a time.”

THE SEEDS OF CHANGE: PROGRESSIVE RELIGIOUS VOICES AND HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYERS

Much of the discrimination against sexual minorities is cast in religious and cultural rhetoric — that it is “un-Christian” or “un-African” to be gay. These hateful views are supported by right wing religious extremists in the United States; they’ve funneled millions of dollars to Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Zambia — countries whose authoritarian leaders are eager to divert public attention away from issues of government corruption, using sexual minorities as a perfect distraction.

Working with people of faith in Africa to speak out against this culture war is a strategic intervention because Africa is an extremely religious continent. People look to their religious leaders for moral guidance. Even where anti-LGBTQ legislation is repealed, as it has been in South Africa, violent homophobia remains pervasive; religious leaders can bring about change by offering a more tolerant, inclusive narrative around sexual diversity.

Still, challenging Africa’s legal systems is an important part of UUSC’s strategy; the law is a powerful tool for advancing human rights. Our partners on the ground are building capacity of African lawyers to litigate strategic cases, and to develop networks of sexual rights lawyers who are affordable and available for LGBTQ clients.

MEET OUR PARTNERS: FOUR ORGANIZATIONS ADVANCING SOGI RIGHTS IN AFRICA

UUSC’s SOGI Rights in Africa Initiative has generated partnerships with grassroots organizations that work directly with LGBTQ people progressive clergy. Our partners represent the true diversity of Africa’s LGBTQ community – including lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women—as well as individuals of both Christian and Muslim faith. UUSC also works to connect these partners to each other’s work in an effort to foster a larger movement of inclusivity.

UUSC AFRICA SOGI RIGHTS PARTNERS

THE INNER CIRCLE

This organization was founded by a self-identified queer Imam to address homophobia and transphobia in Africa's Muslim community. The Inner Circle provides educational materials bridging the gap between fundamentalist Islam and SOGI issues for Muslim human rights activists, feminists, and religious leaders throughout the continent.

INCLUSIVE AND AFFIRMING MINISTRIES (IAM)

This South African organization's mission is to empower LGBTQ leadership and progressive clergy of all faiths to separate homophobia from religious orthodoxy, enabling them to build communities of faith that welcome the spiritual, psychological, and sexual identities of LGBTQ people.

LGBTQ or SOGI?

What's up with these two terms? Our curiosity led to this answer: The first identifies a group of sexual minorities – people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. The second refers to the broad concept of sexual orientation and gender identity – who we choose to love (sexual orientation), and how we express ourselves (gender identity). While some of us identify as LGBTQ, all of us have a SOGI. Making that choice freely is a basic human right.

INITIATIVE FOR STRATEGIC LITIGATION (ISLA)

ISLA has created the African Sexual Rights Legal Network, a program that provides training in human rights law and coordinates a network of “movement lawyers” to represent LGBTQ clients. This network will bring strategic cases to local and national courts to advance the rights of sexual minorities.

TULINAM

This Namibian organization’s mission is to support LGBTQ individuals, their allies, and sympathetic clergy as they confront religious intolerance. Tulinam also works with mainline denominations to create faith communities where sexual minorities are welcome to participate fully and freely.

Jillian Tuck is UUSC’s senior program leader for Rights at Risk.



Photo: Ludovic Bertron

Matching Gifts with Guest at Your Table

An Interview with Stewardship Circle Member Teri Wiss

Conducted by Tom Martorelli



“**I**’ve read a lot about Waiststill and Martha Sharp and their mission to save dissidents and refugees in Europe during World War II. Before I became a good friend of my Unitarian Universalist fellowship, I was raised Jewish. The people the Sharps saved in World War II could have been us because they were us.”

In a recent interview conducted during her morning walk in Sunnyvale, California, UUSC Stewardship Circle Member Teri Wiss discussed the ways she might use the story of how the Sharps defied hate for her annual Guest at Your Table presentation to her congregation. Each year, she takes

a unique approach to inspire fellow congregants to match her \$5,000 matching gift. 2016 marks the 14th year of her matching program.

Teri remembers the day she and her husband Gary Hartz discovered how they could put social justice into their lives. It was at a dinner with UU minister and author John Buehrens, who quoted from Rev. Thomas Starr King's story about the need to not only teach a man to fish, but to build a path to the fishing hole. Gary had the idea that instead of just making their own donation to UUSC, they would make it a challenge grant, asking others to join them by matching every gift dollar for dollar. Teri and Gary started at \$2,500 that first year, and it's been growing ever since.

Sadly, Gary died in 2010, but his name lives on in the Gary W. Hartz Memorial Matching Grant Program. "He was such an activist, I know he'd be proud to see his name on it," she says. "I think starting your own matching gifts program is an idea a lot of UUs can do. You can start anywhere. Dollar for dollar works for me, but \$0.50 per dollar is also okay – whatever is comfortable." Beyond her work managing a successful matching gifts program, Teri also owns her own business as an occupational therapist working with children who have special needs, and makes her contribution to UUSC through her business; it helps her qualify for the maximum tax deduction. "People starting a similar program should consider this too," Teri notes.

Perhaps her favorite part of the program is the way she launches it with a personal story from the pulpit

at the beginning of her congregation's Guest at Your Table campaign. "Each year, I find something that UUSC has done, or I read from the 'Stories of Hope,' to talk about the reasons why I contribute. Last year, I was deeply moved by the refugee crisis and UUSC's ongoing work to protect the most marginalized among us. Nina Kalmoutis, our minister, had read a poem, "No One Leaves Home," by Warsan Shire, a Kenyan-born Somali poet. It really spoke to me, particularly the last line:

'You have to understand, that no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land...'

I often think about how terrible that choice must be, and how we ought to do everything we can to keep anyone from having to make it," Teri says.

Would you like to join Teri Wiss in organizing a Guest at Your Table Matching Gifts Program for your congregation? Contact Carly Cronon, Associate for Congregational Giving Programs, at ccronon@uusuc.org

Tom Martorelli is UUSC's writer and editor.

Small but Mighty: Oaklandon UU Church in Indianapolis, Indiana

By Carly Cronon

Oaklandon UU Church is a small lay-led congregation in Indianapolis, made up of around 40 members. Their support for UUSC has likewise been small through the years—until now.

In the span of a single year, this self-proclaimed “small but mighty” congregation ran three robust UUSC programs and raised as much money to support our human rights initiatives – including the Nepal Earthquake Relief Fund – as many larger congregations do.

A common aspect of Oaklandon’s three programs is hands-on activity. The congregation created prayer flags when they focused a service on the Nepal Earthquake, made their own Guest at Your Table boxes, and in their program about the intersection of economic justice and women’s rights, they put together hygiene kits and notes for girls and women at a local emergency shelter.

Every congregation is different. Oaklandon UU runs successful hands-on activities along with full-group discussions, while other congregations may be looking to support and engage with UUSC in their own unique way. Some congregations are large; others are small. But, as I’ve learned in my time as UUSC’s new Associate for Congregational Giving Programs, all are mighty.



With our interpersonal bonds of faith, family, and friendship, religious communities are uniquely positioned to run intergenerational, interactive programs, such as those organized by Oaklandon UU. Together, we can inspire reflection, encourage discussion, and raise vital funds for UUSC’s work to advance human rights worldwide.

How does your congregation engage with UUSC?

Carly Cronon is UUSC’s associate for congregational giving programs.

GATHER

**Come together with
your family, friends,
community, and UUSC.**

LEARN

**Read about UUSC's
grassroots partnerships
around the globe.**



MOVE BEYOND STATISTICS
**Hear stories of real people
connected to UUSC.**

REFLECT

**Use our worship resources
to consider a theme related
to UUSC's mission and
model for change.**



SUPPORT

**Work together toward a
fundraising goal to support
UUSC's groundbreaking
human rights programs.**

SPREAD HOPE

**Become inspired in your
own efforts to contribute
toward positive change in
the world.**



Guest at Your Table is UUSC's annual intergenerational program to raise support for and awareness about our work to advance human rights around the globe. Learn more, find program materials, and donate to GAYT at uusc.org/guest or by contacting Carly Cronon at ccronon@uusc.org.

Guest at Your Table 2016-17: Defying Hate

By Carly Cronon

When families fleeing violence along treacherous migration routes are turned away as they reach safe ground, it is important to share their stories of resilience, generosity, and strength.

When conservative U.S. religious groups export discrimination against LGBTQ individuals to African nations, we stand with grassroots organizers who provide safe spaces for all, and who advocate for the rights of LGBTQ people to live their lives on their own terms.

When unaccompanied minors are deported from the Dominican Republic simply because they are of Haitian descent, we support organizations that offer these children the resources they need to build new lives in an unfamiliar country.

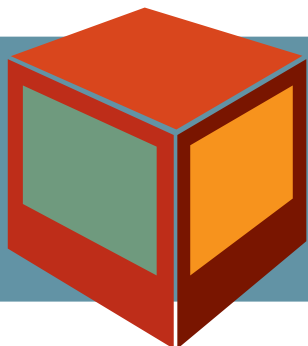
When loud voices assign blame to innocent people and fan the flames of fear, prejudice, and xenophobia, we must amplify the voices that counter with words of hope, welcome, and support.

This year's Guest at Your Table theme—**Defying Hate**—is meant to do just that. In response to hate and injustice, we share stories of hope, and bolster the work of UUSC partners defying hate related to race, religion, and sexual orientation/gender identity.

Guest at Your Table is a long-held UUSC tradition. Our booklet, *Stories of Hope*, shares the stories of real people who defy hate and advance human rights. When there is so much injustice in the world, and when too many deny it exists, there are always stories of hope. Become a part of **Guest at Your Table: Defying Hate**. Read these stories, and help make many more of them possible.

Join us at uusc.org/gayt or by contacting me at ccronon@uusc.org!

Carly Cronon is UUSC's associate for congregational giving programs.



GUEST AT YOUR TABLE

The Value of Sustainable, Ethical Sourcing

Support human rights with every purchase.

By Eric Grignol

As a UUSC member, you know that your dues and donation dollars go a long way toward advancing human rights. But did you know that when you shop at thegoodbuy.com, all proceeds go to UUSC's programs?

When we created the Good Buy, we began with a simple goal: help people with modern purchasing needs live more sustainably. It's a place where our social justice values of environmental stewardship and workers' rights intersect. By finding goods made by those who share our commitment to human rights and connecting artisans to buyers, we're leading the dialogue of what makes something "good" for the earth and for its workers.

When we say "ethically sourced," we mean it, because we've done our homework about our vendor partners and the products we sell.

Here at the Good Buy, it's been thrilling to see a community of people grow with us, asking your own questions about sourcing and workers' rights, and asserting your right to know that the products you buy do no harm to the people who make them and the earth that sustains us all.

Exercise your power to choose differently. Check out the latest selection of products — from delicious artisanal fair-trade food and drink to all-natural wellness products and gifts, and more! We hope you'll continue to support us when you shop online, as together we build the global economy we want for the world — and the world wants from us.

Eric Grignol is UUSC's eCommerce and merchandising officer.



Creating Space to Confront Racism and Grow Racial Justice

By Angela Kelly

It had happened again. Another black man had been shot dead by police, another life lost to the brutality of racism, another painful reminder of the urgency of the Movement for Black Lives. News of Philando Castile's death in Minnesota came less than a day after the police shot Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge. They weren't the last to die: with terrible frequency, other men, women, and transgender people of color are killed just for being themselves – and not just by police. These tragedies, and the long-standing systems of oppression behind them, weigh heavily on all who seek to defy hate.

In response, 30 young adults gathered in July in the sanctuary of the First UU Church of New Orleans for the opening worship of Grow Racial Justice. They sat in a circle around the steady flame of a chalice, and to the rhythm of a beating drum, spoke their intentions in turn: Healing. Courage. Compassion. Humility. Rigor. Accountability. Resistance. Community. Clarity. Love.

For the next five days, Grow Racial Justice offered participants the tools, resources, and relationships to support their racial justice leadership. The UU College of Social Justice and the UUA's Thrive Program for Youth & Young Adults of Color organized the retreat and training, in collaboration with two other groups: Standing on the Side of Love, and the Center for Ethical Living and Social

Justice Renewal. As the struggle for racial justice lives on in our streets and courtrooms, congregations and communities, it was a timely opportunity for young activists to deepen their faith, lift their spirits, build community, and develop skills for organizing within and beyond Unitarian Universalism.

In two uniquely tailored, parallel programs, young adults of color and white young adults explored their racial and ethnic identities, reflected on the effects of internalized racism, and considered how their own experiences compel them to action. They shared stories, struggles, songs, and practices of resistance and resilience. The two groups then came together to learn skills in anti-racist facilitation and grassroots organizing from long-time movement leaders Aesha Rasheed and Caitlin Breedlove. They left with a shared commitment to lead the work required to advance racial justice in their home communities and within themselves.

Participants echoed one another in reflecting on the value of the program. One young adult of color shared, "My time at Grow helped me form a deep, action-oriented commitment to racial justice. I've been inspired to preach sermons that speak the truth about racial (in)justice and my own experiences, to volunteer with my local Black Lives Matter chapter, and to be public with my own actions,

thoughts, and struggles in the fight for racial justice. I can do all of this because I know there is a community of support, helping me move forward.”

Another participant from the white cohort added, “I believe Grow transformed my work from ‘facebook activism’ into true action. I better understand how organizing for change means matching commitment with a plan for how to do it... If we truly want to show up for the world in the ways our principles commit us to, we need to do white-on-white work to dismantle white supremacy.”

A third, who participated in the Thrive cohort, said, “This was a life-changing experience - physically, mentally, and most important, spiritually. I can’t wait to create movements with these people.”

Shortly after Grow Racial Justice concluded, the UU College of Social Justice brought together 15 teenagers for Activate New Orleans: Racial Justice and the Beloved Community, also hosted by the Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice Renewal.

Like the participants in Grow, the youth left this training with new bonds of friendship, a deeper understanding of systemic racism, and a stronger commitment to taking the next steps in their social justice journeys.

Too much hateful rhetoric has filled the airwaves this year. Unrelenting acts of racist aggression continue to distress and dishearten us. Still, the voices of the young leaders who joined us at Grow and Activate Racial Justice offer hope. They remind us that joining together to defy hate through personal transformation and strengthened activism can help us undo racism and foster our collective liberation.

Please visit us at UUCSJ.org to learn more and follow us on social media for updates on ways you can join us in the quest for racial justice.

Angela Kelly is UUCSJ's senior associate for justice training.



Partner Profile Update: Zanmi Timoun

Worse than homeless: Stateless children at the border

By Michael Kourabas

In June 2016, Michael Kourabas, UUSC Associate Director for Program and Partner Support, traveled to the border town of Belladère, Haiti, with Kathleen McTigue, Director of the UU College of Social Justice. They went there to see first-hand the crisis caused by *la sentencia*, a 2013 Constitutional Court ruling in the Dominican Republic (D.R.) that revokes citizenship for anyone who cannot provide proof of legal access into the country. Being born in the D.R. is not enough; the Haitian-Dominicans targeted by this ruling must prove that their ancestors arrived there legally, as far back as 1929.

La sentencia is a hateful, discriminatory law designed for the sole purpose of forcibly removing people of Haitian descent, and it's enforced by Dominican border guards – police and military personnel – whose training is supported by foreign aid from the United States. Dominican police and military routinely select people they assume to be Haitian (they are profiled because of their darker skin), sending them to detention camps without access to food or sanitation facilities. Then – without notifying family members – the D.R. deports them to Haiti, a country they never called home. Worse, Haiti doesn't have the resources to provide for these deportees' most basic needs once they

arrive. It's a human rights disaster unfolding right before our eyes.

UUSC became involved in human rights work in Haiti following the 2010 earthquake that killed 160,000 people and left 1.5 million more homeless. Our partner organization, Zanmi Timoun ("Friends of Children"), which had been helping abused and enslaved children since 2001, was already providing humanitarian relief to earthquake survivors when they became a UUSC partner. Through this collaboration, we learned of the persistent discrimination against people of Haitian descent in the D.R., and the impending effects of *la sentencia*. With additional support from UUSC, Zanmi Timoun began providing humanitarian aid to children caught in these mass deportations, helping reunite them with their parents, and working with the Haitian government to repatriate unaccompanied children.

Still, children – the most vulnerable among tens of thousands of deportees – remain at risk of arriving in Haiti with minimal, if any access to food, clothing, shelter, or bathing facilities. Already, cholera has been reported at some border crossings.

Michael recalls, "When we arrived at the border, we noticed two Haitian Red Cross vans heading to the Haiti Office National de la Migration (ONM) building, where Zanmi Timoun works to receive and document deportees.

They dropped off about 10 young men who had just been deported from the D.R. As soon as they were registered by Zanmi Timoun and ONM, these young men snuck back into the D.R. using an ‘unofficial’ border crossing.”

Had these deportees been minors, they would have faced an even graver situation. “In May, the government locked the Brigade for the Protection of Minors (BPM) building, which Zanmi Timoun had been using to assist recently deported minors,” Michael explained. “Unfortunately, Zanmi Timoun’s supplies remain locked in the BPM building, so they do not even have sanitary kits to give to deportees.”

Pamela Sparr, Associate Director for UUSC’s Justice Building Programs,

sums up the challenge before us. “In crises like these, when the survival of children is at stake, it is important for our country to defy the hate behind the official policies of nations we call allies. Demanding that we stop providing aid to a military force that regularly abuses children is only the first of many things that need to be done. Calling attention to the forced removal of Haitian-Dominicans must be followed by successful work to ensure that the human rights of children are respected in the Dominican Republic and Haiti.”

Michael Kourabas is UUSC’s associate director for program and partner support.



Members of Zanmi Timoun and the Haiti Office National de la Migration interviewing recent deportees from the Dominican Republic.

A Doorway to Freedom...Or Prison?

Fear for their families causes Central American refugees to flee. Why do they wind up in jail?

By Tom Martorelli

While most of the world's attention is focused on refugees escaping Syria and the Middle East to face an uncertain future in Europe, there is another serious refugee crisis here in our hemisphere that has too often been met with silence. Thousands of men, women, and children are fleeing El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, three countries that collectively reported over 17,500 homicides in 2015. Families cannot keep their children safe from criminal organizations, narcotraffickers, and other dangers, and governments in the region are failing to provide them with the most basic protection. Their only choice is to escape, no matter the risk. And so they embark on long journeys through unfamiliar lands, risking death from exposure, arrest by border guards, or betrayal by the smugglers they pay to assist them along the migration trail. Their goal is safety, freedom, and the opportunity to live with dignity and security in the United States. But what do they find when they arrive?

Despite occasionally welcoming rhetoric, the current U.S. administration has pursued some of the most aggressive enforcement actions in recent history: expanded family detention, raids on family homes targeting women and children from Central America, mass deportations, and family separation

on an unprecedented scale. Recently-arrived refugees are routinely classified as “economic migrants,” denied an opportunity to seek asylum, and sent home. Those who remain join a growing population of women and young children held in jail-like conditions for a year or more before their cases are heard.

Last summer, 80 immigrant women held at Karnes Detention Center in Texas went on a hunger and work strike. Beginning on August 8 of this year, another 22 asylum-seeking mothers at the Berks County Detention Center in Pennsylvania began a second hunger strike protesting conditions there. In Berks, several young children are on suicide watch after threatening to kill themselves.

The Central American refugee crisis is not new; nor are the efforts of UUSC and our partner organizations to address it. *Rights Now* readers may recall previous stories about the unspeakable violence these families try to escape, and the intolerable conditions they find in U.S. “family detention centers.” UUSC and the UU College of Social Justice have consistently engaged volunteers to advocate for refugee rights, supported their release to family and friends willing to care for them, and demanded an end to family detention.

Our country's inhumane treatment of mothers and children may be the most immediate aspect of this crisis, but it is not the only one UUSC is addressing. With our partners, we also seek to reduce and ultimately eliminate the violence that causes families to flee their homes, and to provide humanitarian assistance for in-transit refugees along the dangerous migration route through Mexico. Examples of these efforts include:

- In Honduras, UUSC supports a coalition of 17 grassroots women's organizations to confront gender-based violence by accompanying women through legal procedures and searches for housing, and pressuring Honduran government officials to end the escalating militarization of their states.

- Along the border between the United States and Mexico, we are partnering with the **Kino Border Initiative (KBI)** in Nogales to bring public attention to abuses committed against migrants and refugees by Mexican authorities, and to advocate for policy changes end these human rights violations.
- Within the United States, UUSC is supporting **CIVIC** in California to build capacity for self-advocacy among detained migrants and asylum seekers. CIVIC is starting a national 24/7 hotline for immigrants in detention to connect with family members, receive attorney referrals, and challenge the conditions of their detention.

UUSC is also working on an investigation into the Central



Photo: Jeff Percy

American Minors (CAM) in-country processing program, which allows a parent with documentation in the United States to apply for refugee status for children who are still in Central America. We will release a report in the winter of 2016 that reveals the challenges families face when they attempt to use CAM. These range from a lack of Spanish-speaking staff to help families fill out their applications to the risk of violence and even death as children wait in the Northern Triangle for their applications to be processed. The report will provide the Obama Administration and the Department of State with concrete recommendations to better secure the human rights and dignity of Central American children seeking asylum or refugee status in the United States.

Other recent actions include UUSC participation in the “Diapers in Detention” initiative protesting the incarceration of young children, and

renewed calls for President Obama to release young families from detention, grant protected status to asylum-seekers from Central America, and permanently close all U.S. family detention centers.

UUSC President and CEO Tom Andrews notes the special responsibility the United States bears for this crisis, “Throughout the 1980s and earlier, successive U.S. presidents and Congress supported brutally repressive and corrupt dictatorships in each of these Central American countries. Our tax dollars were used to provide funding, arms, and training to military dictatorships and their paramilitary death squads. They carried out a reign of torture, ‘disappearances,’ and assassinations. In the 1990s, brutal gangs created far-reaching criminal networks amidst the chaos, desperate poverty, and absence of the rule of law that was the previous decade’s legacy. Today, the police and military forces in these



countries are, at best, unequal to the task of protecting their citizens from these criminal networks.”

The time has come – once again – for action to renew respect for refugees’ human rights, and to provide the opportunity for safety, freedom, and opportunity for Central American families with no alternative other than asylum here in the United States.

To see a video of Tom Andrews at a recent rally for refugees visit:

<http://tinyurl.com/rally4refugeesUUSC>

Tom Martorelli is UUSC’s writer and editor.



Join the UU College of Social Justice Border Witness Program

Every month, thousands of Central American refugees arrive at the US border, driven from their homes by violence, climate change, and poverty.

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