

Stories of Hope

2016-2017



Advancing human rights for 76 years



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Introduction

Dear friends,

Our theme for this year's Guest at Your Table celebration could not be more relevant to today's world:

Defying Hate.

*It's a theme that shines through each of the **Stories of Hope** contained in these pages.*

You'll read about the courage and patience it took for a lesbian woman in South Africa to overcome the corrosive power of hate with the beauty of love and acceptance.

You'll learn why a 13-year-old boy was cruelly deported from his home in the Dominican Republic — and how he is rediscovering hope for his future.

And you'll read about the dramatic events — and difficult decisions — behind the story of UUSC's founding.

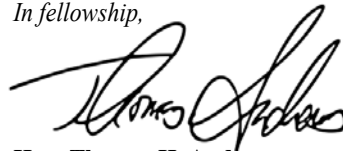
Lastly you will ready about how a family driven from Syria's brutal civil war is making a new home in the United States.

I invite you to become a member of UUSC, if you aren't already — or renew your membership. Be a part of our community of inspired and passionate human rights activists!

You can support our work by making a donation online at uusc.org/givetoguest or by using the reply form at the back of this booklet. Stay informed by subscribing to our e-mail list at uusc.org/email.

Together, we are successfully challenging injustice and advancing human rights. Join us today!

In fellowship,



Hon. Thomas H. Andrews
President and CEO

Visit uusc.org/guest to learn more.



Story 1

Bulelwa Panda

“Through my journey I’ve found out that God loves me the way that I am and that being LGBTI isn’t a curse but a gift from God.”

Bulelwa Panda knows the devastating power of hate.

Hate directed at her from strangers and lifelong neighbors alike. From her family. Even perhaps from her God.

Bulelwa was 18 when she first felt attracted to other women — in South Africa, a country where lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identity remains a deeply taboo subject.

At first she tried to hide her sexuality by dating men, but in 2003, when the deceit became overwhelming, she decided to tell her parents. *“They believed it was a sin and tried fixing me with traditional rituals of slaughtering animals.”*

Although her parents slowly grew to accept her before they passed away, she remains completely estranged from her sister, the sole remaining member of her family.

And when this former Sunday school teacher was first struggling with her sexual identity, she turned to her church — but found no comfort, no solace, no acceptance.

As difficult as those days were, Bulelwa knew they paled in comparison to what other members of the LGBTI community suffered. Beatings. Rapes. Killings.

Which is why, as Bulelwa became more comfortable with her identity during the early years of this century, she also opened up her modest, two-room home to vulnerable and ostracized LGBTI individuals in desperate need of shelter and a kind word.

Today, that same compassionate spirit gives Bulelwa a crucial role in UUSC’s new **Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) Rights in Africa** initiative. Just a few streets over from where she used to welcome people into her small home, Bulelwa now manages the *iThemba Lam* (“my hope”) LGBTI safe house.

Under Bulelwa’s guidance, *iThemba Lam* offers health, legal, and psychosocial counseling to LGBTI individuals from across Africa. Most have been disowned by their families. Many have been beaten or suffered so-called “corrective rapes.” All are deeply grateful for the comfort and security they find under Bulelwa’s roof. Bulelwa manages *iThemba Lam* under the auspices

of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), one of UUSC’s grassroots partners in our SOGI Rights in Africa initiative. IAM works across southern Africa to confront religious-based homophobia by building faith communities that welcome LGBTI individuals.

UUSC launched this initiative because sexual minorities in Africa are among the most marginalized communities in the world. Our work is particularly important because much of the rising persecution of LGBTI groups in Africa is driven by right-wing religious extremists in the United States who actively aggravate homophobic sentiment that already exists across most of the continent.

Shifting deep cultural traditions is not a quick project. Victory comes one step at a time, one year at a time, even one generation at a time.

But Bulelwa, who learned early in her life about the devastating power of hate, has great confidence today in the transcendent power of love and acceptance.

Go deeper and take action:

- Learn more about UUSC’s Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Rights in Africa initiative at uusuc.org/updates/sogi
- Host a Guest at Your Table meal — learn more at uusuc.org/guest
- Make a donation to UUSC at uusuc.org/givetoguest



Story 2

Mathurin Azma

It was because Mathurin Azma wouldn’t stop crying that the soldiers used an electric taser on him.

But what else would you expect a 13-year-old boy to do when a military truck screeches to a halt in front of his home and soldiers leap out and race toward him? When they grab him off his front porch and muscle him into the back of the truck?

And when they drive him across the border from the Dominican Republic into Haiti and abandon him, a stranger in a strange land?

That was the afternoon Mathurin became one of *los afectados* — residents of the Dominican Republic who were born to undocumented Haitian parents and are now being forcibly deported “back” to Haiti in a dragnet as brutal as it is heartless:

“The soldiers beat everyone. They take us anywhere and anyhow. They prevent us from grabbing any item or stuff we have in our house. They force us to leave behind

everything, including money, clothes, tools, and foods. In one afternoon, I lost all my friends in the D.R. I don't even know where my family is in Haiti."

That's because Mathurin had spent all but the first two years of his life in the Dominican Republic. He lived there with his adoptive mother, who spent long, hard hours working as a cleaning lady to earn enough money to take care of Mathurin and pay his school fees. After school, Mathurin would sometimes meet his mother at her workplace to help her finish her work.

But on the day he was abducted by the soldiers, he was home alone. His mother was given no information about what had happened to him. Like most *afectados*, he had no one waiting for him in Haiti. No home, no known family, no friends. Many can't even speak the language.

And children, many of them younger than Mathurin, are especially vulnerable. They arrive traumatized and hungry but are met with — at best — indifference by the Haitian government.

UUSC rapidly responded to this emerging crisis by partnering with Zanmi Timoun ("Friends of Children"), a grassroots organization in Haiti, to help provide forcibly removed children like Mathurin with everything from hygiene kits and clothes to psychosocial support, recreational activities, and assistance locating possible family members in Haiti.

That's why, when Mathurin was released, *"there was already a young lady waiting*

there. She talked to me and asked about the trip. She guided me to an office where I got water to shower and clean clothes and food. I needed to talk to my mother in the D.R., so they gave me a phone. I called ... and let her know that I was deported to Haiti."

A few days later, *Zanmi Timoun* was able to locate family members in Haiti and eventually reunite Mathurin with them. Although he still misses his adoptive mother in the Dominican Republic, he is regaining hope for his future.

He wants to complete his education, but he hopes above all that if he ever has children they will not have to go through the ordeal he has survived — because *"we all are human ... like everyone else in the world."*

Go deeper and take action:

- Learn more about what UUSC is doing to help other children like Mathurin at uusc.org/updates/stateless-means-homeless
- Follow us on Facebook and Twitter to learn more about breaking events in our fight for human rights and social justice.
- Make a donation to UUSC at uusc.org/givetoguest



Story 3

Martha and Waitstill Sharp

The picture is deceiving. The smiling, attractive couple waving from the deck of the ship might be heading off for an elegant pleasure cruise.

They are in fact heading into the heart of darkness.

Within days, in February of 1939, Rev. Waitstill and Martha Sharp would reach Prague, Czechoslovakia, on an emergency mission to help desperate refugees who were swarming into the city to escape Nazi Germany.

And just a few weeks after that, the German army would march into the city, setting in motion the dramatic events that led to the founding of UUSC.

Rather than abandon their mission and return home, the Sharps burned their records and continued their life-saving work, while staying one step ahead of the Gestapo.

On the day the Germans marched into Prague, Martha guided a top resistance leader to asylum at the British embassy. Stopped by Nazi guards three times, she used her American passport to get both of them safely through each checkpoint. A few days later, Waitstill arranged for a member of the Czech parliament to be smuggled from a hospital morgue in a body bag.

The Gestapo shuttered the Sharps' office and threw their furniture into the street. Still Waitstill and Martha stayed in Prague. Finally, in August, the threat of imminent arrest forced them to return home.

This dramatic cloak-and-dagger story has become a familiar one. The Sharps' heroism has been recognized by the U.S. Holocaust Museum and Memorial and the U.S. House of Representatives. They became just the second and third Americans to be named by Israel's *Yad Vashem* as "Righteous Among the Nations," joining the likes of Oscar Schindler and Raoul Wallenberg. Ken Burns, the legendary documentary filmmaker behind *The Civil War* and *The Roosevelts*, just chronicled their story in a gripping PBS production featuring Tom Hanks.

Today, we are struck by their heroism — their decision to accept very real risks to their personal safety to help desperate people who had nowhere else to turn.

But the Sharps also understood that defying hate can involve difficult — sometimes even morally ambiguous — choices. When

Martha and Waitstill made the decision to continue their work in Europe throughout the war years, they did so at a terrible personal cost: leaving their 3-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son in the care of close friends. It was a decision that left a lasting impact on the family.

Years later, their grandson imagined the decision Martha made: *“She knew her children were being loved and cared for and would ultimately understand that her being away from them would be understood in the larger context of what was going on in the world. But it was not easy. My grandparents made the decision they made, and they suffered about it all their lives.”*

Today, we can best honor the sacrifices they made by joining them — each of us, in our own way — in defying hate.

Go deeper and take action:

- Learn more about Martha and Waitstill Sharp in this article from UU World: uuworld.org/articles/heroes-dilemma-how-much-would-you-sacrifice
- Make a donation to UUSC at uusc.org/givetoguest



Story 4

The Alamour Family

“Our choice was to leave our home or die in it.”

Even after three years, the memory of the home she’d fled in Daraa, Syria causes Mona Alamour’s eyes to well up.

She and her husband had spent six years fixing up their modest little structure and turning it into a warm and inviting home for their five children.

That was before three schoolboys scrawled “As-shaab yoreed eskaat el nizam!” on an old wall. *The people want to topple the regime!* That was before Daraa, a small city a few miles north of Syria’s border with Jordan, became an early flashpoint in the mass protests against President Bashar al-Assad. That was before the Syrian army sent

helicopters and tanks and thousands of troops to crush the uprising in Daraa and kill hundreds of civilians.

And that was before the entire country exploded into horrific civil war and became the locus of the worst refugee crisis since the end of the Second World War.

Mona, her husband, Alaa, and their five children joined millions of their fellow Syrians fleeing the country. After a long, harrowing hike through rough country, the Alamours reached a refugee camp in Jordan. Three days later, Alaa and Mona learned that the home they'd worked so hard to build for their family had been destroyed in the fighting.

But their journey was just beginning. While Jordan is hosting hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, the vast majority of them are not allowed to work or gain legal status as residents. For families like the Alamours, caught between a destroyed past and an uncertain future, life in Jordan has become a kind of limbo.

After three years of their unsettled existence in Jordan, life moved forward for the Alamours in October of last year, when they joined the tiny number of Syrian refugees resettled by the U.S. government and arrived in southern California.

Although physically safe from the battlefield that has consumed their home, the war still echoes in their minds. The

nightmares from that trauma continue, making it difficult to adjust to their new life — as does the hateful, xenophobic, and anti-Muslim rhetoric that has dominated so much of recent U.S. political discourse. What they have felt mostly in this strange new country, Alaa says, is “alone.”

That's where UUSC entered the picture. As an organization founded to help refugees fleeing an earlier horror, UUSC is standing with displaced families like the Alamours. In the Middle East, along the migration route through the Balkans and into Europe, and here in the United States, UUSC is partnering with organizations to provide immediate relief aid, medical aid, legal support, employment training, and other services to refugees.

We're also partnering with the Arab American Civic Council (AACC) on a special project to make families like the Alamours feel welcome here in the United States. With our support, AACC put together a Refugees Welcome Guidebook, filled with practical information, including maps and introductions to government and social services, and orientation to U.S. culture. AACC is also launching an anti-stigmatization campaign to engage interfaith congregations (including UU churches) and a diverse collection of community groups in welcoming refugees like the Alamours.

The transition to their new home will remain challenging — but, thanks to your

support for UUSC, they know that they no longer face those challenges alone.

Go deeper and take action:

- Learn how you can help refugees by visiting <http://www.uusc.org/refugeetoolkit>.
- Make a donation to UUSC at uusc.org/givetoguest



Please join UUSC in our work on behalf of human rights and social justice — make a contribution to support our efforts.

Your donation of \$40 or more earns you and your loved ones annual UUSC membership benefits. In addition, all individual and family unrestricted contributions of \$125 or more are eligible to be matched by the UU Congregation at Shelter Rock in Manhasset, N.Y. — doubling the impact of your gift!

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All donations are tax deductible to the extent permitted by law. UUSC's tax ID is 04-6186012. UUSC's CFC number is 11685.

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As a member of UUSC, you join a community of over 40,000 supporters who share your principles and passion for justice. You also stay up to date on pressing human rights issues through periodic mailings, action alerts, and our semiannual newsletter, Rights Now. And most importantly, you join a coalition of others who put their hands to the moral arc of the universe and help it bend toward justice.

Advancing human rights is the work of many joining hands. Join us — with a gift that earns membership for you and your loved ones this year!

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