

Stories of Hope

2017-2018



Advancing human rights for 77 years



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Introduction

Dear friends,

This year’s Guest at Your Table theme — Small Change Is Big Change — celebrates the bravery, innovation, and reach of UUSC’s grassroots partners.

UUSC currently partners with over 75 grassroots organizations on the front lines of critical human rights issues. Most of our partners have small staff sizes, and many are just getting started – but all make a big difference.

The following stories are just four examples of UUSC partners responding to great challenges with limited resources. I hope you will feel as inspired as I do when reading about our partners’ tenacity and impact in the face of persecution in Burma (Myanmar), encroaching erosion in the South Pacific, and immigration detention conditions in the United States.

Small Change Is Big Change also conveys the impact of donations to UUSC. With your support, UUSC and our partners are not only responding to extraordinary challenges of today, we are also addressing root causes of injustice and building capacity to respond to future challenges.

I encourage you to support this year’s “guests” and thousands of others impacted by UUSC by making a donation online at uusc.org/givetoguest or by using the reply form at the back of this booklet.

Together, we can continue to challenge injustice and advance human rights around the globe.

In fellowship,



Hon. Thomas H. Andrews
President and CEO

Visit uusc.org/guest to learn more.



Story 1

Ursula Rakova

“We feel that climate change violates our rights to continue to live on the island that we were born on and that we are connected to.”

The Carteret Islands of Papua New Guinea are among the first communities on earth having to relocate because of climate change.

Back in 2006, Carteret Island Elders began noticing sharp increases in sea surges, tides, and coastal erosion. Sea levels were rising, food sources were dwindling, and there was no formal relocation process or support system in place.

Tired of waiting for the government of Papua New Guinea to turn their talk about relocation into action, the Elders decided to create a support system of their own. They asked Ursula Rakova, the daughter

of the matrilineal clan community and an environmental activist, to lead their community’s migration to higher ground.

Born on the tiny island of Han in the Carterets, Ursula is well acquainted with her community’s deep connections to their land.

She explains, *“The islanders are connected to the islands. They were born there, they grew up on the island, and having to move means detaching themselves from the islands that they’re connected to. The islands are basically their identity. It’s their way of life.”* This deep connection is why Ursula puts migration with dignity, and keeping Carteret Island culture alive, at the forefront of her climate-forced displacement programs.

Responding to the Elders’ call to lead, Ursula founded the non-governmental organization **Tulele Peisa**, one of UUSC’s seven climate-forced displacement partners in the South Pacific. Tulele Peisa, which means “Sailing in the wind on our own” in the local Halia language, supports Carteret Islanders through all stages of relocation, from the first stages of the move to finding a new home and new employment in Bougainville, the resettlement destination in the Solomon Islands.

One way Tulele Peisa works to keep Carteret Island culture alive is local

advocacy, for which UUSC is providing funding. This emerging project supports youth and community members, as they advocate for their rights and forge connections and relationships in Bougainville in advance of moving, which makes the move smoother and more comfortable. With UUSC’s support, Tulele Peisa is organizing youth and Elder speaking tours, and engaging Papua New Guineans and Bougainvilleans in lobbying to protect the rights of climate-displaced peoples and ensure that Carteret Islanders’ culture can thrive wherever they are.

Together with Ursula’s leadership and Tulele Peisa, UUSC is supporting migration with dignity for the Carteret Islanders facing severe climate change impacts they did nothing to create. Ursula’s migration strategy recognizes the importance not just of supporting Carteret Islanders as they leave their homes behind — but also of creating a new home that fits, as best it can, with their identity and way of life.

UUSC’s Environmental Justice and Climate Action Program focuses on assisting indigenous populations of the South Pacific and Alaska, regions that rely on coastal habitats and are facing severe climate change impacts with limited resources.



Story 2

Rosemary Dodd

“Seeing and working with detained children has solidified my perspective on our global obligation to refugees.”

After fleeing intense violence and making the dangerous journey to reach the United States border, Central American migrants are treated more like criminals than who they actually are: survivors of trauma pursuing their legal right to seek asylum.

The Obama administration decided to open new family detention centers in 2014. Since then, U.S. immigration officials have been locking up asylum-seeking families in prison-like, for-profit family detention centers — despite multiple court rulings against the practice and reports documenting inhumane conditions and damaging mental health impacts.

Rosemary Dodd, a Spanish and Political

Science student at Wellesley College, wanted to help support detained families who were facing a convoluted asylum system without legal assistance. Passionate about immigration justice and eager to put her Spanish language skills to work, Rosemary applied to the UU College of Social Justice’s summer internship at the **Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services** (RAICES). A UUSC migrant justice partner based in San Antonio, Texas, RAICES provides free legal help and translation services to the women and children held in Karnes County Residential Center, one of three for-profit detention centers in the U.S. that detains families, including very young children.

One of Rosemary’s primary tasks as a RAICES intern was to prepare women for their Credible Fear Interviews, during which they explain why they fled and why they could not seek protection within their home country – a critical hurdle they must overcome before they can begin the asylum process. Sitting down with Rosemary and RAICES for this preparation was often the first time migrant women heard the words “we are here to help” after reaching U.S. border patrol, being moved between multiple holding cells, and being detained at Karnes. And these are not just words. With Rosemary and RAICES’ help, a far greater number of women passed their

interviews — recounting experiences such as kidnapping threats and gang violence — and were released from detention. As a result of RAICES’ support, rates of approval of Credible Fear Interviews at Karnes rose from around 30% to over 90%.

Rosemary contributed a lot during her experience as a CSJ intern — and left the experience with new skills and a renewed commitment to immigration justice. Reflecting on her experience, Rosemary shares, *“I think family detention is something you hear about, and you can’t believe corporations are profiting from it – but being there, meeting the children, and playing with the kids, you get this huge amount of steadfast knowledge. I left San Antonio with a new commitment to protecting refugees, to ending family detention for good, and to working for justice in whichever form.”*

The UU College of Social Justice, a joint initiative between UUSC and the UUA, organizes programs for all ages designed to help people cross boundaries, gain insight, and imagine new ways to make a difference in the world.

To learn more about volunteer opportunities with RAICES through CSJ, please visit uucsj.org/raices.



Story 3

Aung Kyaw Moe

Aung Kyaw Moe spent his early adulthood working for freedom and human rights in various regions of the world. But after several years of international human rights work in Afghanistan, Thailand, and Liberia, he decided to return home. He explains, *“I had to go back to my own country to help my own people.”*

Aung Kyaw Moe grew up in northern Rakhine State in Burma (also known as Myanmar). Many areas of Burma, including Rakhine, are currently suffering systematic abuses of human rights by the Burmese military, and are fraught with tensions between different ethnic groups. Since Burma only recently became a democracy after 50 years of military dictatorship, the average citizen has little experience participating in their government or promoting peace through collective leadership.

In order to encourage participatory democracy and coexistence between different ethnic groups, Aung Kyaw Moe founded the **Center for Social Integrity (CSI)**, one of UUSC’s nine partners working to promote human rights in Burma. Believing that, in the face of Burma’s tension and violence, *“the only way forward is for youth to work together;”* Aung Kyaw Moe and CSI created a leadership development program for Burmese youth, and UUSC provided funding for the pilot program.

CSI’s pilot program is a three-month-long program for young adults from Rakhine state. CSI chose Rakhine as the first regional focus area because many Rakhine youth are prohibited from pursuing higher education, due to their religion or because they are not recognized as citizens of Burma — officially, they are “stateless.” Aung Kyaw Moe explains, *“their future is not as bright as others”* and describes that area of the country as, in many ways, *“an open prison for the people.”*

Given their limited access to education, the 38 Rakhine young adults currently studying with CSI are *“thirsty for this kind of program.”* The youth meet every two weeks in Yangon, Burma’s largest city, to learn and discuss different issues, with the objective of preventing conflicts

before they happen. CSI trains these youth to become agents of change in their own communities through proficiency in leadership, conflict resolution, democracy, human rights, community development, project management, and community mobilization.

Despite great barriers, Aung Kyaw Moe feels hopeful that a new generation of change-makers can increase social cohesion within Burma: *“The future belongs to youth, and they should shape what they think is the best for them.”* He plans to use the same youth development and leadership model for other regions in Burma beyond Rakhine state, with the goal of youth *“not only claiming their rights but becoming accountable citizens.”*

For updates about UUSC’s work in Burma, please visit uusc.org/campaign/burma.



Story 4

Ali Dawodu

Same-sex sexual activity is illegal in Nigeria. It is also against the law to publicly display same-sex affection, visit a gay club, or be involved in an LGBTQI organization. Punishments range from 10 to 14 years in prison.

Ali Dawodu¹ knew the difficulty of being a gay man in Nigeria and wanted to help others. Despite the risks, Ali created an underground LGBTQI support network, so that Nigerians who had previously struggled alone had a place to share their experiences and where they did not have to hide who they were.

For a while, things went well. But the underground network was discovered.

Ali was attacked and his partner was murdered in front of him — all without legal protection or repercussions. Devastated and afraid for his life, Ali scrambled to get his visa in order and fled to the United States to seek asylum. Upon his arrival, U.S. officials attempted to charge him with visa fraud, and he was held at a Rikers Island detention facility outside of New York City for six months while he waited for an asylum hearing.

Unfortunately, Ali’s experience is not uncommon. Facing violence and discrimination at home, many queer and transgender individuals flee to the United States in hope of better treatment and a better life. Yet, due to an increasingly hostile immigration detention and policing system — one that is particularly hostile toward LGBTQI detainees — many queer and transgender immigrants find themselves facing new forms of violence and discrimination. Queer and transgender immigrants are 15 times more likely to be sexually assaulted in U.S. detention centers and often face discrimination in other forms, such as being denied hormone medications or being held in solitary confinement “for their own safety.”

The Queer Detainee Empowerment Project (QDEP), a UUSC partner

organization based in New York City, advocates against this discriminatory treatment and supports queer immigrants in and outside of detention. With UUSC’s help, QDEP supports LGBTQI immigrants in detention at Rikers and provides structural, health, wellness, educational, legal, and emotional support post-release.

And QDEP was there to help Ali. During the six months Ali was held in detention, QDEP paid him an hour-long visit every two weeks and connected with him through their pen pal program. They also made regular calls to Rikers to speed up his asylum hearing. The Executive Director and founder of QDEP, Jamila Hammami, was extremely persistent in making these calls about Ali’s case, and reflects of the detention center staff: “they weren’t so enthusiastic about my enthusiasm.”

With QDEP’s help, Ali was released from Rikers and granted asylum status. QDEP placed him in stable housing with a host home and is providing him with financial support during his first three months out of detention as he trains to become a carpenter.

Today, Ali attends QDEP’s weekly member meetings, which alternate

between leadership development, film screenings, game nights, and support groups — and always include a hot meal. He continues to participate in QDEP’s pen pal program, though no longer as a recipient, and he is exploring what it means to be out as a gay man without fear.



¹ *For confidentiality purposes, Ali’s name has been changed.*

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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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