



# STORIES OF HOPE

*Guest at Your Table 2020-2021*





# Introduction

In a time unlike any we have experienced before, turning to traditions that nourish our spirits can strengthen our resolve. For more than 45 years, UUSC's Guest at Your Table program has connected Unitarian Universalists with personal stories of our grassroots partners and amplified the impact of their work and your support.

This year, our Guest at Your Table theme is *The Meaning of Home*. In these pages, you will find powerful stories about UUSC partners who are fighting for their right to home in a variety of ways. You will meet Chief Shirell and Mark Stege, who are advocating for their communities and using Indigenous knowledge to combat climate injustice. You will learn about Sujauddin Karimuddin, who is creating community and new opportunities for Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. And you will hear from Adela Ramírez, who supports children and youth who have been deported to Guatemala from the United States and Mexico, helping them find home for themselves in the midst of upheaval and the violence.

I invite you to stay informed about pressing human rights issues and be part of adaptive, creative, and transformative social change with UUSC's partners by participating in our actions and supporting our work with a gift in any amount. We are offering new and engaging ways to participate with Guest at Your Table this year, including short videos of our "guests" which can be used in worship services, Coffee Hours, or as an activity families can participate in at home. I invite you to read and share these stories and support this year's "guests" and the thousands of individuals UUSC and our partners reach by contributing online at [uusc.org/guest](https://uusc.org/guest).



Thank you for inviting these "guests" into your home and for being an invaluable part of the UUSC community.

In fellowship,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mary Katherine Morn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mary" and last name "Morn" being the most prominent parts.

Rev. Mary Katherine Morn, President and CEO



## *Story 1: Sujauddin Karimuddin*

Sujauddin Karimuddin was targeted by the Burmese government because of his Rohingya ethnic and religious identity when he was only 17 years old. A high school student at the time, Sujauddin (who goes by Suja) was prohibited from taking an exam as part of the rising crackdowns in Burma on the Rohingya ethnic minority's access to education, health care, and other basic rights. After challenging the government officer for a chance to take his exam, Suja was arrested, detained, beaten, and held in custody.

"After about 11 days I was released on bail, but with a very large sum of bribe," he explains. But even then, paying the exorbitant fee was not enough to attain "guaranteed freedom," in the words of the officer, who told Suja's mom, "we may pick him up again."





Afraid he might be arrested again and not make it out alive, Suja fled. “I fled by boat to Yangon and from Yangon to Thailand and Thailand to Malaysia and Malaysia to many other countries, ending up in Australia,” he explains. “I was in pretty bad shape when I was leaving, as you can imagine.”

Although he is now an Australian citizen, Suja first spent several years in Malaysia as a refugee and became closely acquainted with the lack of support and services many refugees there face. These experiences inspired Suja, along with other Rohingya community members, to found a non-profit community center in 2017 called Elom Empowerment, dedicated to supporting Rohingya refugees in and around Kuala Lumpur.

The work of Elom can be explained in part through its name, which has a double significance: “Elom” means knowledge in Rohingya, and the name also serves as an acronym for “Empowerment, Learning, Opportunities, Motivation and Mindfulness,” which are central goals of its work.

***“When we talk about ‘what is your vision in life,’” Suja shares, “one thing I say is ‘I want to go home. Back where I’m from.’ The biggest thing is the sense of belonging, the sense of community.”***

Elom provides a wide range of programs at its community center, including education, youth empowerment, community engagement, women’s empowerment, and livelihood assistance. Suja explains that they strive to “provide a safe space for refugees to come and breathe,” where they can practice their cultural traditions and have a sense of community and belonging.

As a new organization largely dependent on volunteer hours and donations from community members, Elom Empowerment began to struggle to maintain the center. “We were starting to struggle to sustain it any longer,” Suja explains. “UUSC provided us funds for operations, rent, and one staff member as well,” which helped “take off the burden from us just to sustain the venue.”

With UUSC’s help, the community center has regained a more secure footing and increased its reach, including expanding engagement with women and youth. Suja explains, “It gave us a lot of room to expand our work in engaging with the community.”

On a personal level, although Suja was able to build new community ties in Malaysia and Australia, he continues to live with the difficulty of having had to leave home. “When we talk about ‘what is your vision in life,’” Suja shares, “one thing I say is ‘I want to go home. Back where I’m from.’ The biggest thing is the sense of belonging, the sense of community.”

Through the community center, Suja and Elom Empowerment help to create a sense of community for refugees who have had to flee violence or oppression in their homes. “We try to build that sense of community wherever we are,” he shares.

## *Links to Learn More*

- [Video interview with Suja](#)
- [UUSC Discussion and Action Guide for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s online exhibit “Burma’s Path to Genocide”](#)





## ***Story 2: Chief Shirell Parfait-Dardar***

In many ways, Chief Shirell Parfait-Dardar and her community in southern Louisiana have been left to deal with climate change on their own. Lacking federal recognition, there is no government funding to respond to coastal erosion, increasingly frequent hurricanes, and other climate change impacts that small Louisiana Tribes, including her own, did little to create.

Nor is there accountability from the oil and gas companies whose canals and pollution have, along with climate change, forever altered the landscape of the region. Thousands of miles of land loss is perhaps the most well-known impact, but it is only one of many environmental damages. Loss of land and trees have destroyed hunting areas, saltwater-intrusion has limited farming to a scant number of crops, and severe flooding has eradicated ancestral burial grounds.

Living without formal support is nothing new for Chief Shirell and the community she leads, the Grand Caillou/Dulac Band of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe. The Tribe has never received any repatriation from the government or the oil and gas industry for the environmental damages they caused, which have limited the Tribe's traditional autonomy. However, the Tribe's determination to be self-reliant and self-sufficient has been a source of strength. "We were and still are in many cases self-sufficient, but that has become more difficult with each passing decade," Chief Shirell explains.



Amid the environmental damages and inadequate responses, several non-governmental organizations have stepped in to offer help. Unfortunately, almost as many have let her down. “We’ve dealt with many organizations over the years that made promises, came into our communities, grabbed their information, and we never heard from them again,” Chief Shirell shares.

***“Many of our traditional practices are not respected, our sacred spaces are not respected, our land, our waters, etc... I pray that very soon our tribes will be able to be a tribe, according to our own laws and traditions. Only then, will we be able to heal and prosper. ”***

That is why she was reluctant to work with Lowlander Center, a current UUSC partner, when they first reached out 12 years ago. “I’ve become very guarded over my people because of the dangers we

face daily,” she explains. But this time, it was a partnership that paid off. Chief Shirell describes how Lowlander Center’s facilitator, Dr. Kristina Peterson, “saw what we had been put through and did everything possible to prove to us that the Lowlander Center was there to help us.”

An all-volunteer organization with no paid staff, Lowlander Center officially began in 2013 and has been UUSC’s partner since 2017. With UUSC’s support, Lowlander has been working closely with Chief Shirell’s Tribe along with other small Louisiana Tribes and coastal Louisiana communities to develop strategies, plans, and adaptations related to the environmental damages they face, including climate-forced relocation.

One stand-out example occurred in January 2020. In collaboration with Lowlander Center and UUSC, Chief Shirell’s Tribe joined with four other



Indigenous communities in Louisiana and Alaska to submit a formal complaint to the United Nations about the U.S. government's failure to adequately address the climate crisis devastating their homelands. Describing the significance of the complaint as "huge," Chief Shirell explains, "We have joined together with our Alaska Native relatives to bring awareness to the damages caused by greed and selfishness, with a complete disregard for Mother Earth and all living beings. We are showing the world that you do not have to just sit by and watch our planet, our health, and lifeways be destroyed."

In the case of the UN complaint and beyond, Chief Shirell feels that partnering with Lowlander Center and UUSC has been valuable for her community. "Lowlander Center has given us a voice and UUSC has amplified it!" Chief Shirell explains. "They have assisted in providing us with the tools needed to address and resolve the many injustices against our peoples."

## *Links to Learn More*

- ["Fighting to Save Home" video narrated by Chief Shirell and created by Julie Maldonado](#)
- ["We Have Been Here Since Time Immemorial" article in \*Cultural Survival\* by Chief Shirell](#)
- [Interview with Chief Shirell on WBUR, Boston Public Radio](#)
- ["Coastal Louisiana tribes team up with biologist to protect sacred sites from rising seas," article in \*Southerly\* featuring Chief Shirell](#)







# Interview with Chief Shirell

## *What are your hopes/wishes for your community and other Louisiana Tribes?*

We need to have our sovereignty respected and protected. As of today, many of our Louisiana tribes have State Recognition and we still have tribes that need recognition. The Federal government has a process based on exclusion for recognizing tribes. You have to meet seven mandatory criteria and quite frankly, there should only be three. The State of Louisiana is currently working on a process through the Native American Commission and we're thankful that this is at least a step in the right direction. Our local government is dependent on State and Federal recognition, so if the Parish Administration and Council feel that they don't want to honor a tribe's sovereignty without some form of recognition, they don't have to. We were and still are in many cases self sufficient, but that has become more difficult with each passing decade. Many of our traditional practices are not respected, our sacred spaces are not respected, our land, our waters, etc... I pray that very soon our tribes will be able to be a tribe, according to our own laws and traditions. Only then, will we be able to heal and prosper.

## *How would you describe the significance of the UN complaint?*

It's huge! We have joined together with our Alaskan relatives to bring awareness to the damages caused by greed and selfishness, with a complete disregard for Mother Earth and all living beings. We are showing the world that you do not have to just sit by and watch our planet, our health and lifeways be destroyed. We do not have to accept the repeated attempts of genocide against our peoples. We are teaching everyone that you are empowered and you have every right to protect your human and environmental rights!

***"Like other tribal communities in southern Louisiana, the Grand Caillou/Dulac Band has traditionally sustained itself through trapping, fishing, and farming in lands and waters that were historically lush. Because of the diversion of the Mississippi River and other development projects, oil and gas extraction, erosion, salt-water intrusion, and the climate crisis, the Tribe has seen these traditional practices threatened."***

***-Excerpt from the UN Complaint***

## *How has Lowlander and/or UUSC supported you in your work?*

The Lowlander Center will always have a special place in my heart. The leaders of the Lowlander center have been there to teach us how to be empowered and have connected us with others who have the same goals of protecting our planet and people. We have many successes, thanks to Dr. Peterson and Dr. Laska. We've dealt with many organizations over the years that made promises, came into our communities, grabbed their information and we never heard from them again. I'm not the easiest person to deal with and I've become very guarded over my people because of the dangers we face daily. Dr. Peterson and I had a rough start because of my doubts, but she stayed. She saw what we had been put through and did everything possible to prove to us that the Lowlander Center was there to help us. Every now and then, I thank her for forgiving me for being so difficult and I remind her of how much of a blessing she has been to all of us. The Lowlander Center has given us a voice and UUSC has amplified it! They have assisted in providing us with the tools needed to address and resolve the many injustices against our peoples. I have to say that Salote is totally amazing! (Salote Soqo is UUSC's Senior Partnership Officer for Climate Justice.) There's an energy within the people who are part of the UUSC that many organizations could benefit by learning from them. Everyone that I've had the blessing of working with through the Lowlander Center and the UUSC is filled with respect, compassion, a sense of responsibility and the drive to create positive change for the greater good. I am forever thankful for them.







## Story 3: Mark Stege

Years ago, Mark Stege (pronounced STAY-gee) grappled with the painful truth that the world was not taking the necessary measures to prevent certain climate impacts from becoming irreversible, including forced-relocation due to sea level rise. “I have had time to process my own sense of fear, anger, loss,” he shares.

Now, Mark strives to foster healing, agency, and leadership among others through involving Marshall Islanders in his research on climate change. “It is important for me as an Indigenous scientist,” he shares, that “the community and the scientist is equally expected to address the priorities and needs of the community.” Prioritizing self-determination for communities, Mark bridges together Indigenous and Western methodologies; promotes Indigenous-led responses to climate change; and advances self-determination for Marshall Islanders facing sea level rise, severe flooding, and other impacts. “Much of my activism is focused on the climate research agenda, and how it is essential that the Western’s climate research agenda grow in indigeneity,” he explains.

UUSC first started collaborating with Mark in 2017 through a project he was working on with the Marshall Islands Conservation Society (MICS) to develop flood risk maps in his home atoll of Maloelap. Through the project, Mark interviewed his elders about past flooding events and natural ocean dynamics that may have contributed to them, and

collaborated with his peers to build models to project future flooding scenarios given sea level rise. With support from various partners including UUSC, Mark, MICS and community members in Majuro, Mejit, Wotho, and Maloelap Atolls successfully developed flood risk maps for these four of 24 municipalities in the Marshall Islands. The project helped Mark and MICS develop the tools that bridge together Indigenous and Western flood risk science methodologies, helping equip community members with information about future flood frequency and timing, while also supporting them in deciding for themselves the level of flood risk they were comfortable with.

Mark is also developing a similar climate research agenda at Jo-Jikum, a non-profit organization focused on involving youth in climate change activism in the Marshall Islands. With UUSC's support, Mark is leading a groundwater quality monitoring project with Jo-Jikum in Laura Village, a town located in Majuro Atoll. Laura's 5,000-person population is supported entirely by the "Laura lens" – a layer of underground freshwater replenished by rainwater that rests upon denser seawater. Recently, increasingly frequent droughts have placed severe pressure on coastal groundwater systems like the Laura lens. "We've been very mindful of droughts as a climate impact," Mark explains. Through his project with Jo-Jikum, Mark is working collaboratively with community members and youth in the



***Mark is pictured above with Chloe Bulles, one of his community elders. He shares, "She was 96 years old when she passed away recently, making her voice that much more important to have captured when we did a couple years ago as part of investigations into the community's experiences with past flooding events." Hoping to continue with this kind of research about habitability thresholds, Mark intends to pursue a doctorate program sometime in the near future.***



Laura Lens Committee to collect data on groundwater quality and rainfall quantities, and engage in citizen science.

Mark's community-led research with MICS and Jo-Jikum represents a departure from the norm. Most often, data collection and analyses are conducted by outside agencies without taking into consideration community priorities and knowledge. In contrast, Mark's work with MICS and Jo-Jikum not only involves communities in data collection but also helps shift decision making and climate relocation planning from a top-down to a bottom-up approach. "Having more local people doing the work can also help avoid perpetuating some systematic biases and historic injustices," Mark explains.

The data collected through Mark and Jo-Jikum's participatory research is used to inform local advocacy to ensure that communities have the adaptation tools they need to stay in their homes for as long as possible. Like many other communities facing severe climate impacts, Marshallese overwhelmingly want to build protection in place.

At the same time, Mark recognizes that forced-relocation is forthcoming for many Marshallese, either from rural communities like Maloelap to urban ones like Majuro, or complete displacement out of country, and is advocating for impacted communities to be prioritized in the response. "We need to make forthcoming long-term adaptation decisions more inclusive," Mark explains, "and integrating more Indigenous methodologies in the underlying climate science knowledge base is a good place to start."

## Links to Learn More

- [Video interview with Mark](#)
- ["When It Hits Home..." article by Mark in HuffPost](#)
- [\*One Story: A Report of the First Peoples Convening on Climate-Forced Displacement\*](#)





# Interview with Mark Stege

*What motivates you to do the work you do? / Why is the work important to you on a personal level?*

The world over must come to terms with the climate crisis by mitigating global warming to 1.5 C and developing adaptation plans for irreversible impacts including, sadly, relocation due to sea level rise. The likelihood of missing the 1.5 C target is deeply troubling. To borrow from the late Tony deBrum, it is “tantamount to asking us to eliminate a society from the face of the earth.” I started to realize this inconvenient truth a decade ago, and I have had time to process my own sense of fear, anger, loss. Now I see coastal cities with populations much larger than the Marshall Islands are coming to this realization at the same time that many of my fellow Marshallese are as well. Collaboration is key to handle complexity, and so I’ve been motivated to develop the tools for collaboration by sharing and adapting both western and indigenous knowledge to promote innovation and identity.

*What is the importance of having indigenous communities and youth, inform and participate in climate research?*

Indigenous communities and especially its youth are well positioned to innovate and offer solutions, not only to future climate challenges but existing ones too. One example comes to mind from when I was on my first climate research assignment and trying to overcome the lack of decent elevation data to create flood maps. Fortunately an older cousin unearthed a stack of printed mylar sheets containing photogrammetry-derived spot elevations from a 1983 aerial survey, and after picking up on some GIS skills and large scanning equipment, I digitized the spot elevations and identified likely flood zones during a king tide plus 2 feet of sea level rise. The shock of our findings delayed release of the resulting flood map, which eventually came out in 2018. By then, I had realized the importance of participating not only in climate research, but also in the development of the climate research agenda.



### *What do you wish more people knew about your community and your work?*

The U.S. GAO recently recommended that “Congress should consider establishing a pilot program with clear federal leadership to identify and provide assistance to communities that express affirmative interest in relocation as a resilience strategy.” This recommendation gives credence to the climate research that the UUSC is supporting in partnership with indigenous communities and partners such as MICS and Jo-Jikum, which is allowing more indigeneity in the research agenda and methodologies being applied. We need to make forthcoming migration decisions more inclusive, while also addressing the fact that over 95% of our coastlines still remain without data essential to manage the climate risks. I believe that participating in the creation of our own maps will help our communities and especially our youth better channel our fear and grief in the decades to come. Having more local people doing the work can also help avoid perpetuating some systematic biases and historic injustices, as was and continues to be the case with the US nuclear testing legacy in our remote islands. We needn’t continue being victims.







## *Story 4: Adela Ramírez*

“People cross the border in search of new opportunities for their families,” Adela Ramírez explains. “That is why we always say that migrating is an act of love.”

A human rights advocate in Guatemala, Adela has a deep understanding of the conditions in the country that make it impossible for many to remain in their home communities. Violence against women, extreme poverty, discrimination against Indigenous peoples, and lack of opportunities for young people are some of the key factors leading record numbers of people – the majority of them Indigenous – to migrate from Guatemala.

“The majority of people here live in conditions that are not good, and poverty prevents them from fully living their lives,” Adela shares about Huehuetenango, the department where she lives in northwestern Guatemala – and where most Guatemalans migrating to the United States in recent years have originated from.

Huehuetenango means “place of the ancients” and is predominantly made up of Indigenous Maya communities who have lived in the area for more than 1,000 years. “We Maya People are an ancient people, builders of life, with a history of resistance, resilience, and struggle,” Adela shares. “Nevertheless, we have been stripped of our lands



and subjected to multiple injustices that make us vulnerable.” Adela points out that the disproportionate rate of extreme poverty experienced by Indigenous people explains why they make up such a high number of people in migration.

For many Maya People and Guatemalans who migrate, the painful process of leaving home is only the beginning of new challenges. “When we are forced to leave our communities, we leave behind everything that is known to face an unknown world,” Adela explains. “In a way, the family is broken. We face many risks and many even lose their lives along the way.”

These challenges are compounded by anti-immigrant sentiment and increasingly harsh immigration policies in the United States and Mexico – which are narrowing the legal paths to asylum, rejecting valid asylum claims, and targeting undocumented people who have lived in the country for years. (Additionally, fleeing food insecurity is not considered valid grounds for asylum, an exclusion especially relevant for Guatemalans migrating.) “Migrating people are treated like criminals,” Adela explains. “When they are captured and returned to their communities, children are left in shelters and other places where their rights are violated.”

This is where Adela and others



***Pop No’j continued work during COVID-19, including distributing food and money to support families facing food insecurity during the crisis. (Adela is pictured left below.)***





from her organization, Asociación Pop No'j, come in. A UUSC partner since 2017, Pop No'j is a civil society organization that advocates for the rights of people migrating and supports people after they have been deported from the United States or Mexico to Guatemala. With UUSC's support, Pop No'j staff members like Adela accompany families throughout the process of return and reintegration, providing mental health services, educational support, and vocational training. "This accompaniment work is very important since it includes psychosocial care," Adela shares. "Separation deeply impacts their emotional and mental health."

In her work, Adela explains that she is careful to avoid "revictimizing the families," recognizing that the injustices they have experienced are painful to relive. Instead, Adela and Pop No'j foster empowerment and provide families with the tools to improve their lives. "We are only here to accompany and facilitate processes," she explains. "With our work, we want to facilitate learning so that the people can become the protagonists of their own lives and be agents of change."

Pop No'j recognizes that addressing immediate needs is not enough – so they are advocating for the rights of people in migration on a larger scale while envisioning a more just Guatemala. Adela shares that Pop No'j "promotes the building of 'buen vivir' or 'good living,' based on the Maya People's worldview, their identity, and rights." In this way, Pop No'j strives toward a just society where people are not forced from their communities by poverty or other factors, but rather can experience their full rights and identities wherever they are.

## *Links to Learn More*

- [Video of Adela](#)
- [UUSC blog post featuring Asociación Pop No'j](#)
- [Video greetings from other Asociación Pop No'j staff](#)

