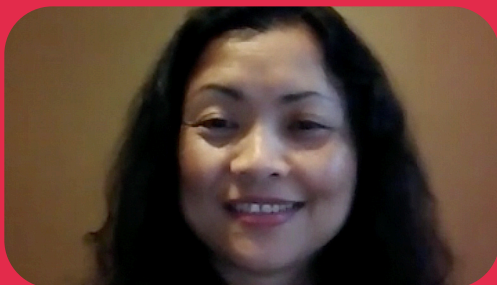




# Stories of Hope

2021-2022

*Now is the Time for Courageous Change*



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Dear friends,

The intersecting crises of COVID-19, institutionalized racism, and climate change have put the need for systemic change into even starker relief. Rather than “return to normal,” we need to fundamentally shift toward a world that prioritizes human rights, thriving communities, and a healthy planet.

At UUSC, we believe that transformational solutions come from grassroots leaders and communities most impacted by injustice. This belief is at the heart of our partnership model – in which we strive to listen deeply, follow the lead of, collaborate with, and resource grassroots organizations on the front lines of advancing change.

This year’s Guest at Your Table program, focused on the theme *Now is the Time for Courageous Change*, highlights stories from four leaders of UUSC’s partner organizations. We are excited to introduce you!

This year, you will hear from Axel Fuentes, director of the Rural Community Workers Alliance, who is supporting the rights of migrant and refugee workers facing unjust working conditions in midwestern U.S. meat processing plants.

You will meet Myra Dahgaypaw, leader of the U.S. Campaign for Burma, who is using her experience as a

survivor of previous Burmese military junta violence, to amplify the voices of Burmese ethnic minorities facing military brutality today.

You will learn about Maina Talia, co-director of Kioa Island Community Organization, who is mobilizing along with the community of Kioa Island in the Pacific to secure a resilient future in the face of climate change.

And you will be introduced to Cristian Guzmán Merlo from Fundación Entre Mujeres, a feminist organization revolutionizing farming practices and gender justice in northern Nicaragua.

Thank you for getting to know this year's "guests" and joining us for our annual Guest at Your Table tradition – the largest source of financial support for UUSC's human rights programs from congregations. We invite you to help advance community-led change and support Axel, Myra, Maina, and Cristian by making a gift at **[uusc.org/guest](https://uusc.org/guest)**. Together, we can support their important work, join them in solidarity, and make strides toward a more just future.

In fellowship,



Rev. Mary Katherine Morn,  
President and CEO



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## **Story 1**

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### **Axel Fuentes**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought new attention to the injustices faced by meat processing workers. As meat industry executives worked from home, assembly line staff worked shoulder-to-shoulder, often without adequate access to Personal Protective Equipment, healthcare, or time off. In one high-profile story that sparked outrage, executives at an Iowa pork plant took bets on how many of their workers would contract the disease.

But like other injustices exacerbated by the pandemic, problems with the meat processing industry were pre-existing – and something Axel Fuentes has been working to rectify for years.

Axel is the director of Rural Community Workers Alliance (RCWA), a grassroots organization based in northern Missouri that supports the

rights of workers facing unjust working conditions in the rural Midwest – particularly immigrant and refugee workers in the meat processing industry. Noting the irony, Axel explains that meat processing and other food service workers, who supply food for others, often endure extreme hardship in order to be able to put food on their own tables. “In the United States, immigrant and refugee workers are the backbone of the food system’s labor force, but these workers are treated as disposable,” Axel shares.

The list of abuses Axel and RCWA respond to is harrowing.

“There have been countless stories of injustices committed against workers that range from discrimination, verbal abuse, sexual assault, to people being forced to urinate or defecate in their pants because they were not allowed time to go to the bathroom,” Axel explains, adding that there have been “dozens of workers who are injured or suffer accidents because of the excessive speed with which they have to make cuts of meat.”

Through his work with RCWA, Axel interviews workers about working conditions, raises awareness about abuses, provides leadership trainings, conducts education and advocacy workshops, and helps workers seek

restitution for injury – which is especially important since companies often deny that workplace injuries take place inside their facilities at all. With UUSC’s support, he also works to empower workers and encourage solidarity across racial, ethnic, and other differences.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when meatpacking plants remained open and companies were even less responsive to their workers’ safety, the need for RCWA’s work became even more salient. “Workers were called heroes,” Axel recalls, “but government institutions and decision-makers failed to create standards that force employers to take necessary measures and provide appropriate equipment to make workplaces safe and healthy.”

Rising to these increased challenges, Axel and RCWA were there for meat processing workers during the public health crisis when governments and companies were not. For example, RCWA made headlines in April 2020 when they filed a lawsuit against a pork plant in Missouri for inadequately protecting their workers from COVID-19. Although the lawsuit was dismissed, RCWA gained major news coverage and credits the lawsuit and increased public attention for forcing the company to make changes, which were cited by the court in its dismissal.

As Axel and RCWA responded to heightened challenges faced by workers during the pandemic, UUSC was able to provide increased support for their work. Axel shares, “UUSC’s support has been one of the most important pieces for RCWA to be able to survive and make progress as a grassroots organization in the fight for the rights of the most vulnerable, since UUSC has been present in the most difficult moments of our organization.”

Looking ahead, Axel hopes to be able to expand RCWA’s reach to additional communities – in order to organize and empower even more workers to defend their rights. “I see us replicating RCWA’s work in other communities and being able to reach other workers through organizers that speak their languages and know their cultures; that we can break down the barriers that separate and divide us and that together we can solve the problems that affect us.”

### **Go deeper and take action:**

- Learn more and watch a video of Axel at **[uusc.org/guest](https://uusc.org/guest)**.
- Make a donation to UUSC today at **[uusc.org/givetoguest](https://uusc.org/givetoguest)**.





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## **Story 2**

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### ***Myra Dahgaypaw***

Afraid for her life, Myra Dahgaypaw fled her home in Burma (also known as Myanmar) in 1995.

Myra was forced to escape from her home because of the violence and human rights abuses so commonly experienced by ethnic minorities in Burma. “It was a living nightmare,” she remembers. “I fled with just the clothes on my back.” A member of the Karen ethnic group, Myra consistently witnessed military brutality toward her community.

“We had trenches around our school so that as soon as we hear the sound of the fighter jets, we can just literally jump straight into the trenches,” Myra recalls. “I saw a lot of people were killed, even including my own classmates.”

Now settled in the United States, Myra sees it as her responsibility to

advocate for the people of Burma who continue to face abuses like those she fled – as well as grave dangers in speaking out. “The brave, the resilient people of Burma, they refuse to be silent,” she explains. “So, it is my responsibility to amplify their voices because I have the platform, I have the voice, and I am safe to do so.”

Myra amplifies the voices of human rights activists in Burma – and much more – through her work directing the US Campaign for Burma (USCB). A human rights advocacy organization and UUSC partner, USCB is dedicated to promoting inter-ethnic solidarity, raising awareness about crimes committed by the Burmese military, and bringing about an end to the military regime. As Myra explains, a central goal of USCB is to help the international community “hear the voices of the people on the ground.”

Myra and USCB’s work was needed more than ever following the 2021 coup d’état, when the Burmese military, which already held significant political control and veto power, dropped the pretense of supporting democracy altogether.

In the early hours of February 1, 2021, the day the new Parliament was set to take office, the Burmese military seized power, detaining human rights advocates and barring elected

leaders from taking office. As internet and communications went down and tanks rolled through the streets, the military instituted emergency control of the country, citing the pandemic and baseless claims of election fraud.

In the ensuing months, the brutality of the military – long endured by ethnic minority communities like Myra’s – was on horrific display. As peaceful protesters took to the streets in a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) not seen in Burma since the 1980s, the military murdered more than 800 people and injured thousands more.

Following the coup, Myra and USCB quickly sprang into action. With UUSC’s support, USCB provided emergency funding to help protesters fearing for their lives get to safety. “Just recently, UUSC helped us with one of our USCB projects aiming toward providing aid for the CDM protesters who were forced to flee Burma and come out to the ethnic minority areas,” Myra explains. “Such support has bridged the gap in rebuilding the country in big as well as small ways.”

UUSC is committed to supporting groups like USCB to ensure that ethnic minorities of Burma, who have long been denied their rights and faced brutality for decades, are not left out of the multi-ethnic movement for democracy that emerged from the

protests.

With close ties to the Karen, Rohingya, and other ethnic minorities of Burma, Myra is a key leader in bringing people together and moving this vision of inclusivity forward in Burma – and she will not stop until her work is no longer needed.

“Something I’m hoping for and working toward too is that I’d like to see a Burma where everyone is embraced and welcomed no matter their race, their ethnicity, or their religious differences,” Myra shares. “I envision a peaceful country that finally has achieved a true democratic state where the power lies with the people but not the military, and also a country that finally realizes that inclusivity makes them stronger.”

### **Go deeper and take action:**

- Learn more and watch a video of Myra at **[uusc.org/guest](https://uusc.org/guest)**.
- Explore the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s virtual exhibit “Burma’s Path to Genocide” and UUSC’s companion guide at **[uusc.org/burmas-path-to-genocide](https://uusc.org/burmas-path-to-genocide)**.
- Make a donation to UUSC today at **[uusc.org/givetoguest](https://uusc.org/givetoguest)**.



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## **Story 3**

### **Maina Talia**

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Located across Buca Bay from mainland Fiji, Kioa Island is resplendent with steep volcanic slopes and brightly wooded mountains. Fishing, handicraft, root farming, and copra processing for coconut oil generate just enough revenue to support the island.

Although Kioans are citizens of Fiji, they have a history and culture all their own. In 1947, residents of Vaitupu, one of the eight coral reef islands of the nation of Tuvalu, purchased Kioa and resettled to the then-uninhabited island, bringing their culture and traditions with them.

“Kioa Island, our new ‘home away from home,’ maintains the practices, language, cultures and the social norms inherited from Vaitupu,” explains Maina Talia, the co-director of Kioa Island Community Organization (KICO), the only non-governmental organization established and led by the people of Kioa.

Given Kioa's relatively recent history, its people are still working to establish a secure footing and resilient future for generations to come, for example through improving farming yields and access to fresh water. "We want our children and our grandchildren to have access to clean water, electricity and so forth," Maina explains. KICO is helping support these goals through creating, with community input and leadership, the first-ever strategic plan for Kioa.

But it is not just their own future the people of Kioa are working to preserve. Kioans are preparing for the possibility that many more people from Tuvalu might need to relocate to Kioa – not by choice as they did, but because of the worsening impacts of climate change.

In the face of this potentiality, KICO is helping prepare Kioa to be more climate-resilient and migrant-ready, and to ensure sufficient food is available if people from Tuvalu's low-lying islands are forced to relocate to Kioa's higher elevation.

"Up until now there are no major developments on Kioa," Maina shares. "However, in the context of climate-induced migration that potentially threatens the security of our people in Tuvalu, Kioa must be well prepared. The island must provide agricultural support, moral support, and have

climate-proof structures to ensure the continuity of our people.”

KICO is working towards this goal by training community members in agroforestry, an agricultural technique that helps yield climate-tolerant crops and cleaner water through strategic tree planting. “Foremost and very important in this training is helping the community to finally reach their aim of attaining a more improved living standard,” Maina explains.

Another important benefit of agroforestry is that tree cover helps prevent soil erosion, supporting Kioans in their resiliency and adaptation to climate change.

The challenges Kioans face are exacerbated by a dearth of funding and lack of recognition of Kioa’s needs and culture as distinct. “We want people to know that we really need their financial support to develop our island,” Maina explains. “We have settled this island for 75 years now and have no major developments implemented in Kioa. One of the reasons could be the fact that the island is owned by the People of Vaitupu in Tuvalu but fully operated under Fiji’s jurisdictions and laws of governance.”

Striving to respond to this gap in support and bolster Kioa’s desire for self-determination and cultural survival,

UUSC is providing funding to KICO while amplifying Kioan stories and priorities at the global stage. As UUSC is for many grassroots organizations around the world, UUSC is KICO's "first funder," meaning that UUSC is the first organization to provide financial support to KICO. "The support from UUSC to Kioa via KICO is the first ever funding to be received by Kioa for the past 75 years," Maina shares. UUSC's funding is helping support their strategic planning and agroforestry efforts, as well as helping cover office equipment and internet access.

UUSC hopes that, with additional support and more awareness about Kioa, the island will be able to achieve their vision of improved quality of life and resiliency to climate change. "Our vision is to build community resilience," Maina explains. "There are a lot of things Kioa could offer for the future generation, if we continue to strive for it now."

### **Go deeper and take action:**

- Learn more and watch a video about KICO at **[uusc.org/guest](https://uusc.org/guest)**.
- Learn more about UUSC's climate justice program at **[uusc.org/initiatives/climate-justice](https://uusc.org/initiatives/climate-justice)**.
- Make a donation to UUSC today at **[uusc.org/givetoguest](https://uusc.org/givetoguest)**.





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## **Story 4**

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### **Cristian Guzmán Merlo**

Through feminist programs, advocacy, and a thriving women's farming cooperative, UUSC partner Fundación Entre Mujeres (FEM) is revolutionizing farming practices and gender justice in northern Nicaragua.

Organized by and for rural peasant women, or *campesinas*, FEM works in 21 communities to promote the economic, political, and social empowerment of women in Nicaragua. "What we want is collective transformation in the communities of this country, and all over the world," shares Cristian Guzmán Merlo, co-director of FEM.

As a farming cooperative, FEM accompanies women as they gain access to their own land; provides trainings on how to become hibiscus farmers, beekeepers, and coffee growers; and helps members process and sell their products at a fair price.

This is a significant departure from the way farming is usually done in Nicaragua. Typically, large companies own the land, seeds, and products, and dictate the farming practices. “The owner of the corporation owns your food, and continues to take over our ways of life,” Cristian explains.

Conversely, FEM supports women to own their own land, preserve traditional farming methods, and cultivate seed varieties that have been used by their communities for generations. This way, cooperative members are not forced to purchase lower-quality seeds from commercial sources – and are helping repair ecological damage caused by the farming practices promoted by multinational corporations.

At the same time that FEM is transforming farming practices, it is changing the landscape for gender justice. Violence against women is prevalent in rural Nicaragua, and limited economic independence gives women few options out. In addition to helping change that by providing women with their own land and sources of income, FEM supports women experiencing violence and responds to femicides, advocating for justice and convictions of abusers. FEM also supports women’s empowerment through workshops and education, including adult literacy trainings and university scholarships for young women. Many women who have

finished college are now supporting other women in their communities to develop programs about topics that FEM promotes, such as education, health, women's rights, agroecology, and environmental justice.

As Cristian puts it, FEM seeks to “transform power dynamics between men and women, so that campesina women can advance their power, their self-sufficiency, and their conditions.”

The challenges faced by FEM and its members have increased in recent years. Hurricanes Eta and Iota wreaked lasting havoc on Nicaragua in fall of 2020 as communities were already dealing with COVID-19, political violence, and severe drought brought on by climate change. On top of this, the Nicaraguan government has recently increased restrictions on non-profits like FEM, making it more difficult for them to access international funding. As a result, FEM suffered a decrease in their budget by one third from 2020 to 2021. Recognizing these mounting challenges, UUSC increased our support for FEM these past two years.

All of these challenges – including damaging farming practices of multinational companies, gender inequity and violence against women, and increasingly severe hurricanes tied to climate change – underscore the need for systemic alternatives that prioritize

community health, dignity, wellbeing, and a livable planet.

Fortunately, FEM is not only devising an alternative economic, political, and social model – they are actively building it. Cristian explains, “We put our stake in a different model, with agroecology, with happy women, women farming, women participating in business and becoming independent, women free from violence.”

### **Go deeper and take action:**

- Learn more and watch a video of Cristian at **[uusc.org/guest](https://uusc.org/guest)**.
- Explore immigration justice study resources at **[uucsj.org/immigration-justice-resources](https://uucsj.org/immigration-justice-resources)**.
- Make a donation to UUSC today at **[uusc.org/givetoguest](https://uusc.org/givetoguest)**.



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**Unitarian Universalist Service Committee**

689 Massachusetts Avenue

Cambridge, MA 02139-3302

tel: 617-868-6600 • fax: 617-868-7102

[development@uus.org](mailto:development@uus.org) • [uus.org](http://uus.org) • CFC#11685