



# *Stories of Hope*

2022-2023

*Hope, Courage, Action*



Photo credit: István Bielik

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Dear friends,

For decades and generations, UUSC's Guest at Your Table program has invited UUs and congregations to provide vital support to those who need it most, including communities impacted by forced migration, climate disasters, and other human-made crises. In the past year, we have seen growing violence in places like Ukraine and Burma, devastation to communities around the world due to the climate crisis, and the increased need for solidarity with people seeking refuge within the United States.

At UUSC, we believe the transformational solutions we need 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 to, follow the lead of, collaborate with, and resource grassroots organizations on the front lines of addressing harm and advancing change.

Thank you for spreading the word in your congregation and communities about UUSC's partners and our important work for human rights.

In fellowship,



Rev. Mary Katherine Morn,  
President and Lead Executive Officer

Dear fellow justice-seekers,

This year's Guest at Your Table program, focused on the theme *Hope, Courage, Action*, highlights stories from four leaders of UUSC's partner organizations. We are excited to introduce them to you!

You will hear from Zsolt Szekeres who is guiding the Hungarian Helsinki Committee's Refugee Program as more than a million people flee Ukraine following the Russian invasion to seek safety in neighboring Hungary.

You will meet Naw Wah Ku Shee, of the Karen Peace Support Network, who is working with her own Karen community and other ethnic minorities in Burma to lift the voices of those resisting the violent military junta and promoting a democratic Burmese society to the international community.

You will learn about Ian Zdanowicz, co-director of the Queer Detainee Empowerment Project, an organization offering support, solidarity, and community for queer people in U.S. immigration detention and those who have been recently released.

And you will be introduced to Ineza Umuhoza Grace from the Loss and Damage Youth Coalition, a global organization amplifying the voices of youth, especially from the global south, as they petition governments around the world to uphold their promises and take meaningful action in response introduce them to climate crisis.

Thank you for joining UUSC for Guest at Your Table to learn more about our global partners who are embodying hope and transforming lives. We invite you to help advance community-led change and support Zsolt, Naw Wah Ku Shee, Ian, and Ineza by making a gift at [uuscs.org/guest](https://uuscs.org/guest). Together, we can find new sources of courage to inspire the action needed to uphold human dignity for all and honor our connections with each other and the earth.

In faith and solidarity,



Rev. Laura Randall,  
Director of Congregation Relations



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## Story 1

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### Ian Zdanowicz

Ian Zdanowicz left Poland 14 years ago to escape the homophobia and transphobia in his homeland. "Especially as a trans person and as an immigrant it takes time to rebuild your life in a foreign place and culture," says Ian. "It can be really scary and very lonely." His search for community in the United States led him to the Queer Detainee Empowerment Project (QDEP) where he first became a member, then a volunteer, then a staff member, until eventually becoming co-director of the organization.

"Working at QDEP allows me to provide immediate support to newly arriving queer and trans immigrants hoping that they don't have to do all that work from scratch to find their people and resources that they need," says Ian. "We do our best to make sure that new members feel that

they have a community here and that we have each other's backs no matter what. That helps to alleviate feelings of isolation, loneliness, and stress related to being in immigration proceedings and having to go through so many traumatic experiences to finally arrive in New York City and then start rebuilding your life."

QDEP aims to address the particular needs of queer and trans people during the harrowing immigration process in the United States and highlight experiences that are often overlooked by U.S. media. "Members of LGBTQIA+ community go through a lot of traumatic situations, discrimination, and violence in their country of origin before they decide to migrate," says Ian. "Then during the travel to the Mexico/U.S. border, they are at a very high risk of the same type of violence and discrimination that they experienced in their country that they are fleeing from."

Arrival in the United States does not mean an end to discrimination and violence for those seeking asylum. Trans people detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are sent to detention facilities that correspond to their sex assigned at birth and not their gender identity. Because

of the sexual and physical violence trans women are often subjected to when housed in men's units, ICE frequently locks these women up in solitary confinement, sometimes for months, for their "safety." This time in profound isolation, compounded by the traumas already experienced to that point, takes a heavy toll on their mental health.

"The United States is one of few rich Western countries that incarcerates asylum seekers and does not provide them with governmental support while they are in the asylum proceedings," Ian said. "The United States does not provide special protections for LGBTQIA+ immigrants and that is why the work of building powerful, inclusive, and fearless immigrant communities and LGBTQIA+ communities is so important."

QDEP has been a UUSC partner organization since 2017. UUSC supports QDEP's direct services program, which assists LGBTQIA+ immigrants in ICE detention as well as those newly released with rent, grocery, and utility support. UUSC has also been partnering with QDEP for the past three years on a leadership development program for trans women, cis queer women, and gender non-conforming folks who are impacted by the immigration system.

"[This program] helped uplift amazing community members who are now becoming leaders of the movement to abolish ICE, and fight transphobia and homophobia as well as sexism," says Ian. "We are so very grateful to UUSC for all their work and continued support. We wouldn't be here without them."

Ian goes on to say, "I believe that love, care, and solidarity make our lives possible and make our communities powerful and soft at the same time. Love, care, and solidarity build bonds and relationships that can't be easily destroyed by the violence and injustice. And only together, in strong unity, will we be able to abolish ICE, prisons, and other systems of domination and injustice that impact our lives."

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

- Learn more and watch a video of Ian at [\*\*\*uusc.org/guest\*\*\*](https://uusc.org/guest).
- Make a donation to UUSC today at [\*\*\*uusc.org/givetoguest\*\*\*](https://uusc.org/givetoguest).
- Engage in needed human rights advocacy at [\*\*\*uusc.org/action-center\*\*\*](https://uusc.org/action-center).



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## **Story 2**

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### ***Ineza Umuhoza Grace***

Ineza Umuhoza Grace, Global Coordinator and co-founder of the Loss and Damage Youth Coalition, first experienced the effects of the climate crisis at an early age when her family home in Rwanda was destroyed due to intensive rainfall and wind. "But growing up," Ineza says, "I didn't know that was the impact of climate change." For Ineza, connecting this formative experience to the changing climate came later. "After high school, I was watching the news one evening and then I saw on the television a particular area in my country where the community was being forced to move because of flooding and erosion. On the television you could see that most of the people who were being displaced were women and children. And that reminded me of the powerless feeling that I had back then."



Called to address the climate crisis and serve in her community, Ineza decided to study environmental engineering at the University of Rwanda. In 2020, Ineza helped found the Loss and Damage Youth Coalition (LDYC), a coalition of youth from the global North and the global South who join together to drive action, demand justice, and address loss and damage brought on by climate change. With more than 300 members from 40 countries, the Loss and Damage Youth Coalition is committed to sharing and amplifying the voices of youth impacted by the climate crisis while holding global systems and processes accountable.

Focusing on advocacy, training, communication, and storytelling, all with the purpose of demanding “finance to address loss and damage,” the Loss and Damage Youth Coalition engages in a wide variety of initiatives, including petitioning global leaders at international events such as the UN climate negotiations (Conference of the Parties, or “COP”), sharing the science of climate change with various communities while also centering the importance of Indigenous knowledge, creating cohorts of youth storytellers to share their experiences with loss and damage caused by climate change through art, and campaigning for

investment in resilient infrastructure and restitution for communities devastated by the climate crisis.

“Everyone, everywhere is exposed,” says Ineza about the current climate situation. “Everyone is vulnerable, but the level of vulnerability depends on the level of infrastructure already in place, the educational system, the funds and finance, everything that is already in place can reduce the level of vulnerability, but at the end of the day everyone is vulnerable.”

As it is for many grassroots organizations around the world, UUSC is LDYC’s first funder, meaning UUSC is the first organization to provide LDYC with direct financial support. “Having [UUSC’s support] allowed us to be able to catalyze other funding because, you know how this system works, once you have one funder you are able to get the next one which is really incredible.”

When reflecting on her commitment to the global climate movement, Ineza points to her responsibility to her younger siblings and to future generations. Speaking about the changes she has witnessed in Rwanda just in her lifetime, Ineza says, “We can ask a kid, ‘When was the last time you saw a butterfly?’ Because butterflies are a part of the

animals that are being endangered due to climate impacts. And you find kids who say, 'I saw it on television.' No one can see them in nature. And for me, I grew up seeing butterflies." Ineza continues, "I don't want to leave the future very red. It's already red. But maybe it could be a little bit less red. And then maybe in the next 15 years, things will be much better for the current youth generation, especially children."

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

- Learn more and watch a video of Ineza at [\*\*\*uusc.org/guest\*\*\*](https://uusc.org/guest).
- Make a donation to UUSC today at [\*\*\*uusc.org/givetoguest\*\*\*](https://uusc.org/givetoguest).
- Engage in needed climate advocacy at [\*\*\*uusc.org/action-center\*\*\*](https://uusc.org/action-center).



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## **Story 3**

### ***Naw Wah Ku Shee***

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For decades, the people of Burma, also known as Myanmar, have experienced discrimination, persecution, and violent oppression by the military junta directed against ethnic and religious minorities. In February 2021, the military attempted to wrest control from the duly elected civilian government, dramatically escalating the violence and oppression experienced in Burma. In the face of public protests since then, the military has killed more than 2,000 civilians and imprisoned 15,000 more. Executions of pro-democracy leaders are now following sham trials by the military. It is estimated that more than a million people have been displaced.

A member of the Karen (pronounced KAH-rin) ethnic group in Burma, Naw Wah Ku Shee has personally experienced the violence perpetrated by the military regime against her family and community.

Having never known a life without this conflict, Naw Wah Ku Shee felt called to act on behalf of her community, working for Karen women's organizations before joining the Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN), the largest network of Karen civil society organizations in Burma.

KPSN member organizations have facilitated humanitarian support for conflict-affected Karen communities, internally displaced persons, and refugees for decades; a need that has increased since the coup. "For us the situation is worsening each day due to the ongoing human rights violations committed by the regime," says Naw Wah Ku Shee. "Especially the continuous air strikes and heavy artillery shells into villages and into the farming areas nearly every day. The fight is not only in the Karen state, it is nationwide. It's happening all over Burma."

Attacks by the military junta have destroyed entire villages in Karen state, displacing thousands within Burma and forcing many to try to cross into neighboring Thailand, where humanitarian resources are also stretched thin. Naw Wah Ku Shee points to international action, through targeted economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure, as key strategies in creating tangible change in Burma now. "It's important that the

international community stands with the people and supports the people's movement, supports the existing structures that provide support to those who are fleeing from the cities and those who are fleeing from Burma."

The escalation of violence and oppression by the military junta in recent years has increased the logistical challenges and emotional toil for those working for KPSN. Still, Naw Wah Ku Shee says the coalition is as committed as ever to the goal of a free Burma. "For us, we continue fighting for genuine change, especially the establishment of the federal democracy in Burma and equality for the ethnic people. We have been calling for the international community to support our call to not recognize this military regime and to impose economic sanctions against this regime, including [on] aviation fuel. It's important that we are united in this fight, and at the same time we also need the international support to continue pushing for the genuine reform and change in Burma where we could go back and live peacefully and equally as a community and as the people of Burma."

UUSC has been partnering with grassroots organizations led by ethnic minorities in Burma for more than 25 years. These deep connections have



meant that UUSC is one of very few international organizations who have been able to get humanitarian aid to communities since the military coup. "Through the support from UUSC, we can continue to document the ongoing human rights violations and raise awareness about the human rights situations in Burma," says Naw Wah Ku Shee. "And we also can continue our campaign and continue pushing for the genuine reform in Burma."

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Photo credit: István Bielik

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## **Story 4**

### **Zsolt Szekeres**

A UUSC partner since 2015, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC) is the largest, oldest, and, currently, only non-governmental organization in Hungary providing assistance and representation for asylum-seekers and refugees. They provide individualized counseling and legal representation for asylum seekers and migrants.

Drawn to the work of promoting human rights from a young age, senior legal officer and legal coordinator of the HHC's Refugee Program, Zsolt Szekeres, ultimately decided that practicing law in his home country of Hungary was where he could make the most impact. "Already at that time it was quite clear the direction that the country was going to take," says Zsolt, "It was drifting away from the ideas of a progressive and inclusive society and

moving toward a more restrictive one when it comes to universal human rights and the rights and liberties of historically excluded groups.”

Now, the influx of more than a million people fleeing the war in Ukraine and seeking refuge in Hungary has increased the number of people needing the HHC’s services exponentially. Zsolt says that the invasion of Ukraine transformed their work almost overnight as Hungary became a first nation of arrival for the people fleeing directly from a war-torn country. “We had a large number of people coming directly to Hungary and the state authorities were really not in a shape to meet this challenge at all. Because of the consistent policies of the government before [the war in Ukraine], the asylum authority and the police were simply not in an adequate form and shape to respond in a humane and human rights sensitive manner to the large number of people crossing the Hungarian border. So, we very quickly realized that we are the only organization in the country who can provide large scale information and in-person legal counseling for people about their rights and possibilities.”

One of the ways HHC is meeting this need is by ensuring that lawyers and other HHC staff are available daily to answer incoming requests

for information and assistance in a variety of languages, including Ukrainian and Russian.

Because of the strength of UUSC’s relationship with HHC, forged over many years, UUSC was able to respond quickly to the crisis in Ukraine by providing an emergency grant to the HHC.

More than just monetary support, UUSC offers solidarity. This became especially important as the Hungarian government attempted to stop HHC from operating. “We were in dire need of any assistance and help both in terms of publicity, moral support, and financial support for the activities that carry out the protection of asylum seekers and the general rule of law in Hungary,” says Zsolt. “It was very uplifting for us that our partners, including UUSC, did not abandon us in this fight. The response that we got, including from UUSC, was that despite the government’s clear efforts to shut us down, you will stand behind us and keep supporting the important work that we do. Under such circumstances our voice, our commitment, and our uncompromising attitude toward human rights really makes a difference.” Zsolt adds that it has also been incredibly heartening that despite years of hate-mongering by the government, there has been

a spontaneous and overwhelming social response to the crisis in Ukraine by the Hungarian people. "We are, together with our partners, upholding a basic sense of decency in a country that's being so tormented and ravaged by the radical right. That is, I think, incredibly important."

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Please join UUSC in our work with these partners — 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 \$150 or more are eligible to be matched dollar for dollar by the UU Congregation at Shelter Rock in Manhasset, N.Y. — doubling the impact of your gift!

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City

State

Zip

Email

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Congregation

City

State

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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 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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