

Legal Aid Attorney Attends International Human Rights Course

By Teresa Rendon

From January 23 through 31, Teresa Rendon, Legal Aid Farmworker Attorney, and Dr. Jody Horn, Professor and Chair of the Criminal Justice/Sociology Department at Oklahoma City University, attended a course on human rights activism at the University for Peace (UPEACE) near San Jose, Costa Rica. UPEACE was created in 1980 as a Treaty Organization within the framework of the United Nations, and according to its brochure, was charged with the mission of providing “humanity with an international institution of higher education for peace with the aim of promoting among all human beings a spirit of understanding, tolerance and peaceful coexistence.” To that end, UPEACE offers graduate courses to an international student body, which currently consists of 180 students from 50 countries.

The trip to UPEACE, perched high up in the mountains, requires a fifteen-minute daily bus ride which affords a glimpse of a wide range of tropical plants in bright crayola colors: orchids, poinsettias, cannas, bougainvilleas, to name a few. Coffee plants also fill the landscape with a lush green. By the time students arrive at the university, they find themselves on top of a mountain with a breathtaking view of the Costa Rican countryside.

While many UPEACE students are pursuing masters degree courses in international law, peace education, natural resources, and peace, etc., there are also short one-week courses offered for those whose responsibilities back home don't allow them to stay that

long. Attorney Rendon and Professor Horn took a one-week course under the direction of Dr. Reza Eslami, UNESCO Professor at the University of Tehran, Iran, and at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. Among the 20 students in the human rights activism class were those from Norway, Brazil, Mexico, Tanzania, Kenya, Canada, and the Philippines. Professor Eslami laid the groundwork for the concept of human rights as inherent, rooted in human dignity, grounded on the notion of equality, and aimed at having all human beings enjoy equal rights. Eslami explained that prior to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it was assumed that persons' rights arose from their relationship with their governments, but after the Declaration, a new notion emerged of human beings having rights prior to and independent of their relationship with their governments. In the course's analysis of human rights and humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), students learned that many humanitarian NGOs, because of their political neutrality, had unintentionally bolstered repressive regimes in rendering their citizens humanitarian aid. The discussions in this class were enriched by the breadth of international experience embodied in the students and their deep awareness of international events.

Upon returning to the U.S., “I was wondering how to put this all together and what use these notions of international law and treaties would have on my local law practice,” said Rendon. “Then I picked up a copy of



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Clearinghouse Review: Journal of Poverty Law and Policy and read an article about how principles of international human rights law had been used where state and federal law were of no help, how parent groups from Los Angeles and New York City have ‘used principles of ‘human dignity’ drawn from international human rights standards to organize and advocate more humane disciplinary protocols in the public schools.’” Even though the U.S. has not signed on to many of the conventions and treaties, they set a standard of what human rights should be. According to the

article, “human rights law may support judges and administrators seeking to do the right thing, may inspire policymakers to undertake bolder initiatives, and may support clients in organizing to protect their own human rights, thus changing the power dynamics in a community.”

¹ Martha F. Davis, Human Rights in the Trenches: Using International Human Rights Law in ‘Everyday’ Legal Aid Cases. *Clearinghouse Review: Journal of Poverty Law and Policy*, Vol. 41, nos. 7-8, p. 415.

² Davis, p. 426.