

Program in International Human Rights Law Indiana University School of Law - Indianapolis

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Teaching Globally

Indiana University-Indianapolis law students fighting for international human rights

Catherine Depret enters the Rwandan church where over 5,000 ethnic Tutsi people, mostly women and children, once sought refuge from that country's horrific 1994 genocide. Their desperate hope was that the beautiful old church would be a safe haven from the carnage that was tearing the nation apart from within. But during those days, no place in Rwanda was safe. Hutu extremists laid siege to the church, firing guns, hurling grenades and swinging machetes for hours until every screaming adult and every crying baby was silenced.

Now Depret sees the skulls and bones of the victims still lining the church benches next to family Bibles, shoes and bits of clothing. Depret talks to some people who had been in the overcrowded churches the day before the killings but were forced, fortuitously, to hide in the fields to escape the rampage.

Depret meets Ancilla, whose husband, oldest child and sister were all killed in their own home by their neighbor. Ancilla survived only because she was left for dead under the pile of her family's bodies.

From the racial and ethnic hatred that left over a half-million Rwandans dead, Depret sees signs of healing. Ancilla has moved back into the family home, where she raises her children and her sister's children. Like many surviving Rwandans, Ancilla has refused to teach the young ones to distinguish between Hutus and Tutsis. The neighbor who killed Ancilla's family is in prison facing murder charges, a significant development in a Rwandan criminal justice system that was decimated by the death or flight of most of the country's judges and prosecutors.

Depret is herself part of the healing process. She spent the summer working in the office of the prosecutor general in Kigali, helping refine the Rwandan criminal code and studying a new system of community-based dispute resolution. The goal is to alleviate the strain on a court system that must deal with detention and trial of hundreds of thousands of accused *genocidaires*. "They are having to create everything new there — a new country, a new legal system — with very little means," Depret says. "It is important that the Rwandan people can see that justice is being done."

It is a far cry from the cloistered lecture hall scenes of the *Paper Chase*, but Depret is fulfilling the requirements of a law school class. Her tenure in Rwanda was part of an internship in international human rights law with the Indiana Univer-

sity School of Law-Indianapolis.

In the five years since the school created one of only a handful of such programs in the country, over 50 local law students like Depret have fanned out across the globe to assist organizations protecting human rights. With scholarship assistance from the school, IU students have worked in a wide variety of human rights campaigns, including advocating for Nepal's "untouchables," documenting human rights abuses in East Timor and working for the United Nations in Geneva and Australia.

In all, the local law students have worked in more than three dozen countries in every inhabited continent. "If there is any program in our law school that says we are not provincial and limited to Central Indiana, certainly this is the program," says the school's dean, Norman Lefstein. "A law school ought to be a great teacher of values, and back up that teaching by providing opportunities for students to act on those values. That's exactly what we have done with this program."

Human rights superstar

Professor George Edwards is in his law school office, fussing over last-minute revisions to a Yale law review article and sending out e-mails to students in Belize and Latvia. Edwards is the human rights program's founder and director, and he puts down his work to show a visitor the location of this year's interns on several maps and globes studded with brightly-colored pins denoting students' human rights placements. The appearance of the soft-spoken man wearing shorts and sandals, Edwards is the possessor of a top-this resume that includes Harvard Law Review, a stint at a silk-stocking Wall Street law firm and United Nations accreditation. His Yale article will help define the reach of the international criminal tribunal in The Hague. At a reception last spring honoring the program's success, IUPUI chancellor Gerald Bepko called Edwards a "superstar of the faculty."

But he's a reluctant superstar. Students and colleagues who sing Edwards' praises and wish he was more high profile describe him as maddeningly humble. For instance, it takes awhile to discover the reason Edwards will not be easily accessible for photographs for this article. It turns out he is spending this fall shuttling between stints in the United Kingdom as a

Visiting Fellow at Cambridge, accepting a Fullbright Grant to lecture in Peru on international human rights law and serving as a delegate to the United Nations World Conference Against Racism.

Edwards traces his own interest in human rights law in part back to an experience during a summer break from Harvard. He was working for a law firm in Thailand when a friend asked him to visit a refugee camp outside Bangkok. Edwards was stunned to see the squalid living conditions and restricted freedom endured by the refugees. "That was my first real experience seeing that type of human rights violations in action," he says. Moved, Edwards decided to spend subsequent summers working on famine relief and refugee rights projects, and eventually walked away from corporate law for a career in human rights law.

Edwards says experiences like Catherine Depret's in Rwanda provide a global perspective that changes both the students and the law school they return to. Word of mouth has led to increased demand for the competitive internships and higher enrollment for Edwards' human rights law class. Prospective students from around the country and even from other nations apply to Indiana University because of its human rights focus. Students returning from human rights internships have founded a 35-student strong chapter of Amnesty International and a society for international human rights law. "Neither of these groups would have been founded but for the program," Edwards says. "Now their leadership has been turned over to students who were not interns, so the human rights culture has trickled down through the student body."

Local Amnesty International chapter coordinator Tom Benner says Edwards has helped spread that human rights culture outside the walls of the law school by generously sharing his time and expertise with local activists. "Along with the other members of Amnesty, I have a deep concern about human rights abuses against people all over the world," Benner says. "One of the problems we encounter in recruiting new members to Amnesty International is that too many Americans are simply unconcerned about the world beyond our borders. Programs like George's do a lot to help counter that."

Benner can personally attest to Edwards' capacity to inspire. After 28 years as an actuary, Benner recently decided to switch careers and enroll in law school, where he hopes to soon be a 50-something human rights intern under Edwards.

Awakening people

Katherine Hendrix is the student who founded the law school's Amnesty chapter after spending the summer of 2000 advocating for refugees in Prague, in the Czech Republic.

Hendrix worked with a Helsinki legal organization whose mission is to help the families who live in primitive Czech refugee camps while waiting for decisions on their requests for asylum. Only 2 percent of the asylum requests are granted, leading most of the families to be deported unless they escape to illegal status. One refugee Hendrix worked with had fled Afghanistan after being imprisoned for two years by the Taliban, only to discover his wife and children had spent the entire time in a Czech camp waiting for word on their asylum request.

Like most human rights advocates, Hendrix had to fight to retain optimism in the face of seemingly unending human suffering. "The biggest struggle over the summer was with the feeling of helplessness," Hendrix says. "It's tough looking in the eyes of someone who's been in the process for two years, and not be able to affect their day-to-day issues."

Nevertheless, Hendrix believes good results will come from her work researching the political conditions of countries fled by the refugees. She also agrees with Edwards that the experiences of the human rights interns have had a positive effect on the culture of the law school. With its evening-school option and surplus of career-conscious scholars pursuing professional jobs while fitting in their studies, the local school's student body has long been labeled as politically apathetic. But Hendrix and her fellow interns return from overseas to a school where three different volunteer human rights groups are now thriving, so she suggests that reputation should be reconsidered. "There are a lot of students here who want to do things to help people, but they are encouraged to go on a narrow linear path of clerkship and then a law firm. Now that the school has this program, it shows students they can get the same skills in a more rewarding way.

"There is just so much energy devoted to human rights here," she says. "I think the program is awakening people." □

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