

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

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From Wall Street to International Human Rights Law

Indiana's connection with international human rights in recent years has been limited. The Dalai Lama has occasionally visited Bloomington. Besides blessing Indiana, he calls on the international community to help stop China's oppression of Tibet, and help restore Tibetan self rule. The Tibetan cause is further championed by people like Richard Gere, who could just as easily be making more pretty women movies and winning Oscars.

Now, Indiana has its own champion of international human rights, who has sacrificed no small fortune for the sake of human rights education and advocacy.

Why is Professor George Edwards, a graduate of Harvard Law School, in Indianapolis teaching International Human Right Law, when he could be earning a six figure salary on Wall Street?

After graduating from Harvard, Edwards worked for several years at the prestigious Wall Street law firm of *Cravath, Swaine & Moore*. Edwards commanded a six figure salary by helping multinationals litigate mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures and business contracts. Edwards says "I decided that my sanity, my peace of mind and inner soul are more important than my pocket book. I reached that understanding when I was working up to 70 to 80 hours a week and I couldn't see how I was helping anyone besides shareholders. In fact at some point, it wasn't clear to me how I was helping my self."

Several events in his life redirected Edwards towards the public interest life of teaching and human rights advocacy. When Edwards was 17 years of age, he won a writing contest whose 1st prize was to represent black American youth at the *Festac Arts and Culture Festival* held at Lagos, Nigeria for 2 weeks. It is in Nigeria that Edwards' world began to widen. There he met young

men and women who excelled without the great resources available to him in the US. There he also stared poverty and injustice in the face. Edwards made a pact with himself to make a small difference in this world.

Edwards devoted his school life to excellence. Excellence landed him at Harvard University, where he graduated in 1986 with a Juris Doctor degree in law. He gained a wealth of writing experience at Harvard, and was associate editor of the *International Law Journal*, and editor of the *Harvard Law Review*.

Harvard should not receive all the credit, because Edwards also comes from a family with a history of strong academic success. His parents instilled good work ethics in all of their children. The result is that today all seven children have succeeded. The siblings include a plastic surgeon, a pediatrician, 3 lawyers, a doctor of psychology and a manufacturer.

Professor Edwards recalls that a deciding factor in becoming a human rights advocate and academic happened when he was in Thailand. While a Harvard student, Edwards was hired to work for one summer at a Bangkok-based Thai corporate law firm. While in Bangkok, he received a phone call from one of his Harvard classmates inviting him to visit a refugee camp south east of Bangkok.

"That was my first real look at, and touch of, the world of international human rights, and the devastating affects of human rights violations. It was more than an eye opening experience. Though I had witnessed, and had even been the victim of, human rights violations at home in the United States, it was not until my first trip to Asia that I gained an informed and proper perspective of the relationship between international human rights law and the suffering of

individuals in domestic settings.”

After returning to Harvard, Edwards signed up for other international human rights law opportunities. While still a student, he ventured off for one semester to conduct a famine related project in Ethiopia and the Sudan. During another semester, he worked in Geneva, Switzerland for the *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees*.

A great deal of Professor Edwards’ experience in human rights took place when he lived in Hong Kong. Edwards spent 6 years there honing his academic and advocacy skills. For several years, he ran the *Centre for Comparative and Public Law* at the University of Hong Kong. While at HKU, Edwards was heavily involved in advocacy on behalf of non-governmental organizations before local tribunals, including the Hong Kong Legislative Council, and various United Nations bodies. He also lectured the two University Law Faculties in Hong Kong, and for the Law Society of Hong Kong. His areas included human rights and public law.

Many of Edwards’ numerous publications relate to Hong Kong human rights issues, and include his co-editorship of the *Hong Kong Public Law Reports*, several other books, and numerous articles. In addition, Edwards has delivered international human rights law lectures around the globe. Speaking invitations have taken him to South Africa, France, Hong Kong, Australia, among other places.

Edwards testified at the United Nations regarding numerous violations in Hong Kong, such as freedom of speech, freedom of association, the right to adequate food and housing, the right to participate fully in the electoral process, and discrimination based on race, age and sexual orientation. While in Hong Kong, Edwards was touched by the poor housing conditions.

“I was appalled by the housing conditions of the ‘cage people’ who are mainly elderly living in metal cages no larger than coffins. Hong Kong is a territory where the per capita income is 25,000 dollars US. There are more Rolls Royces in Hong Kong than in any country in the world. And they have people living like this. People have a right to adequate housing.”

In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Edwards represented

Human Right Watch-Asia as a human rights law expert to observe the trial of a human rights worker named Irene Fernandez. Irene is an advocate for the rights of migrant workers, who are sent to Malaysia from numerous neighboring countries, such as Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, the Philippines, and India. Often, after migrants are abused by their employers, the migrants escape from their employers. Because of visa restrictions, the migrants find themselves arrested and placed in government-run detention camps. Irene published a report that described the horrible conditions in the camps, and the abuses perpetrated therein. Irene disseminated the report to the press and to the governments of countries that send the migrants to Malaysia.

Irene was arrested and charged with maliciously publishing false news under a rarely-used statute. The purpose of the statute is to suppress freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

Professor Edwards says “Those who want to protect victims become victims themselves. They become victims of the very regime that was suppressing the original victims.” Well decidedly, being a human rights activist can land you in jail, or result in your being tortured or killed.

Edwards has actively participated in international conferences in Canada, Italy, Hong Kong and elsewhere. One highlight of Edwards’ recent conference participation was his opportunity to greet *United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan* and *South African President Nelson Mandela*. Edwards met the two men this summer in Rome during the *UN Diplomatic Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Establishment of a Permanent International Criminal Court*.

Edwards said: “it was truly my honour to have the opportunity to shake hands with those true champions of human rights — Nelson Mandela and Kofi Annan. Just as those two men are heroes to millions of downtrodden and abused persons around the globe, they are my heroes.”

In 1997, Indiana University School of Law-Indianapolis hired Edwards as Associate Professor of Law. He founded the *Program in International Human Rights Law*. Their mission, as stated on their newsletter, is:

“a) to further the teaching of international human right law; b) to promote scholarship in international human rights law; c) to assist human right governmental, non-governmental, and inter-governmental organizations on international human rights law projects; and, d) to facilitate the placement of students as overseas and domestic law interns.”

The IU-I Law School *Program in International Human Rights Law* is strong and vibrant. Since his arrival in Indianapolis in early 1997, and since founding the program, Edwards has placed 15 IU Law students in human rights summer internships, in 17 different cities and countries around the globe. He organized full scholarships for law students to intern for 12 weeks at human rights organizations in: Cape Town, South Africa; Hong Kong; New York; Geneva, Switzerland; New Delhi, India; and Sydney, Australia. The New York and Geneva interns worked for the United Nations, while the others worked for non-governmental or governmental entities. Edwards hopes to expand the number of students and internship locations during the 1999 summer.

Edwards says “our best students can be compared with students at the top Ivy league law schools.” Professor Edwards hopes that by studying human rights law, students will gain insight into the way the world works. He hopes students will gain an understanding of the atrocities and horrors that are committed not only by governments, but by the very multinational corporations where his students might be working tomorrow.

Edwards says that many corporate executives and lawyers live in a vacuum today. They never see the people they are affecting on the other side of the globe. They never see the poor ones who sew the baseballs and soccer balls, or the ones who sew the designer dresses. They never witness first hand the child labor abuses.

Professor Edwards is very popular on campus, as evidenced by numerous front page articles written in the *Sagamore* in the last year. Dean Norm Lefstein of the IU School of Law stated in his dean’s message, “we are fortunate to have the PIHRL, as well as Professor Edwards....”

Indianapolis is very fortunate to have a man of his caliber in the community.

Congratulations to the Indiana University School of Law! Welcome Professor Edwards!

by Kojo Francisco

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