Karen Tse[1] USA (1964-)

She could be called a human rights activist, but her focus and methods are different than most human rights activists. Her focus is on the legal rights of ordinary people who have been accused of crimes. Negative news stories and horrible photographs are not part of her tactics.

She works with governments, not against, and this she can do only where a government has already passed laws saying that a person accused of a crime has certain rights. Her goal is to work with people in these nations to make these rights on paper come to be a part of everyday life.

She is CEO (Chief Executive Officer) of the non-profit, non-governmental organization she founded in 2000, International Bridges to Justice (IBJ). She has a staff of 21 or so to help her now — but I am getting ahead of the story.

Karen Tse
(From IBJ website)

Lessons Learned While Traveling

Karen grew up in California, the child of immigrant parents who met in the US. As a child, she heard many tales about human rights abuses in Asia. Around the age of 8 she began having a repeated dream of watching police torturing a prisoner, but being unable to help. As a college student, she began writing letters demanding fair trials for political prisoners[2].

In 1986, Karen was accepted to both UCLA's law school and Harvard Divinity School, but couldn't decide between them. "My heart said to go to divinity school, while my practical side said law school," she says. (Lee, 2007)

Since she couldn't decide, she spent the next year in Hong Kong and Thailand teaching in refugee camps. Here, she met refugees who had been imprisoned for things they didn't do; and she began to understand the connection between her two passions: human rights and justice for people accused of crimes.

She tells the story of a boy she met who was in prison for stealing a bicycle. He had no one to help him, no trial date scheduled to decide his guilt or innocence or how he might be punished. He could have stayed in jail for years and years, forgotten. Here was a person who needed help even more than the political prisoners she used to write letters

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[1] Pronounced "Cheh"

[2] Political prisoner - a person imprisoned because of actions or writing that is disliked by those who have police power in a country.

for when she was a college student. And there were many like him in the jails she visited, people who desperately needed someone to help and defend them - especially if they were innocent.

Another thing Karen learned in her visits to prisons was that torture is routinely used by police around the world on ordinary citizens to get confessions and "prove" that the person is guilty.

Karen was surprised, and you might be surprised too, to learn that the main use of torture in today's world is not on terrorist suspects or political prisoners. No, it is on people the police have arrested because they think they are guilty of something. Often the police are just trying to be efficient. They are trying to speed up the process of justice.

After these experiences, Karen chose to put off divinity school and entered law school, where she studied to become a public defender (defend the accused who don't have the money to hire a lawyer). After working in San Francisco for several years she went to Cambodia. (1994-1997).

> " 'I saw children and women in prisons,' she recalls. 'When I'd ask, 'Why are you here?' I would hear stories like 'I've been locked up for ten years because my husband committed a crime and the authorities couldn't find him, so they jailed me instead.' Developing countries use torture because 'it is the easiert and cheapest form of investigation.' "
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> **--Tse, Karen as quoted by Lee, 2007.**
> --In: Lee, 2007

Cambodia: Inventing A New Approach

When Karen began her work in Cambodia in 1994 there were 10 lawyers in a country of 9.8 million, thanks to the Khmer Rouge, who while in power had murdered thousands of judges, lawyers, and other educated professionals.

She was there because of the recently passed new laws outlawing the torture and providing citizens with basic rights, including the right to a lawyer if accused of a crime. Here was a chance to establish a legal system where even the poorest accused person could get some legal help.

Karen and her colleagues developed a four-part approach that can actually be applied anywhere. First, get official agreement and support at the national level. Second, build up legal institutions, both governmental (legal system) and non-governmental (oversight groups), especially at the local level. Third, let the public know about their rights if accused of a crime, and fourth, create supportive connections.

Without the official agreement and support, the project cannot go forward. One reason that governments become interested working with IBJ is that they become convinced that a good legal system will help them attract investment and international respect. This official agreement gives IBJ staff access to officials they need to work with at the local level — police, police stations, and the legal-aid system that already exists.

One of the first projects is to write a criminal defense and legal aid manual, based on that country's laws. The manual is then jointly published with the country's Ministry of Justice, so it has official status. In the process of writing it, Karen and the IBJ staff find

out important information about the current legal system and how it is working. They meet important people, and start thinking of possible actions.

Many changes with important effects are relatively easy to make. One example is providing consultation rooms for prisoners to see their defenders. Another is agreeing on the steps for informing the defenders that someone has been arrested and needs their help. It is fairly easy to establish standard procedures that police will follow in advising people they arrest about their rights. Rules can be agreed on regarding when and how a defender can see a client. Trial procedures can be established (for example rules about the sharing of evidence between prosecutor and defendant). It is important to set up a way to record new cases and to note their progress (so people don't end up in jail forever), etc Each item is fairly small by itself, but together they can help form a strong system in which people who are thrown in jail aren't forgotten and can get help for themselves.

Training is an important element of their IBJ's work. In Cambodia, Karen began by training ordinary citizens, none of whom were lawyers, on the basics of defending accused people. These people became Cambodia's first legal aid agency. She also set up the first arraignment (uh-rain-ment)court in Cambodia. This is a court whose function is specifically deciding whether there should be a trial or not (that is, whether the police really have valid evidence of a person's guilt.) She also trained prison guards, police, and judges[3].

Out of Karen's work in Cambodia grew two Cambodian organizations which continue to challenge and improve the system, the Cambodian Defenders Project, and Legal Aid of Cambodia.

As you might expect, there were problems with parts of the government, as well as with judges, prison officials, prosecutors, and police officers, who are used to doing things a certain way and who had not been part of the agreement to establish a system where prisoners' rights are respected. Despite these obstacles, the Cambodian defenders were able to slowly establish their presence and to convince others of the need for the changes they advocated.

"Martin Luther King, Jr. said, 'injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' Whatever we do for another also affects us. The roots of our humanity call us to give ourselves up to the greater whole. There is strength and power in the recognition of our interconnectedness. It is part of our destiny and heroic journey to reconnect human rights and dignity to all who share this world. "

--Karen Tse
--In Tse, 2006

A Global Support Network

A last and critical part of IBJ program is to link legal defenders to the Global Defender Support Program (GDS). They are creating a network that will connect defenders, who often face tremendous obstacles, and thus provide support both from within their own country and internationally. Through GDS, IBJ continually recruits people who want to participate at all levels, from judges who want to be mentors, to computer experts willing to do consultations, to church groups who want to help some legal aid office in one of these countries out

[3]Part of this work was sponsored by the United Nations Center for Human Rights, where Karen is a Judicial Mentor.l.

financially. Karen says, "I see volunteer partnerships from all over the world helping in this movement, because an effectively functioning criminal justice system will safeguard the basic rights of future generations to come." (Tse, 2006) Support can ease the journey to establishing a legal system that incorporates prisoner's rights, which is long and filled with setbacks and even danger. In Cambodia, threats against defenders were common. In China, defenders were frequently punished along with their clients.

A global network is also needed for financial support. The issue of criminal defense has been essentially ignored by the international human rights community. People accused of non-political crime don't inspire sympathy from most people. We know they may be guilty and we tend to trust that they would not be in prison if the police didn't have a good reason to arrest them. This has made it hard to raise funds for improving legal defense systems.

Hope Lies In the Human Heart

Law school, Karen says, developed her "tough mind." To be the best lawyer, you had to be competitive and good at fighting with words. But two people in particular whom she had met in her travels, a boy and a nun, taught her through their actions the power of the "tender heart" that Martin Luther King talks about (King, 1981), and the power of "transformative love" to enable us to connect on a deep level with another person even if we dislike or fear them. (Green, 2006)

In 1997, to concentrate on the "tender heart," Karen entered divinity school and eventually became an ordained minister in the Unitarian Universalist Church. "It was in divinity school," she says, "that I began to understand that the hope for the human world lies in the human heart." (Green, 2006, p.3)

In 2000, while she was still in divinity school, Karen used her savings to found International Bridges to Justice (IBJ), basing it in Geneva.

> "Then there was the Indian nun who inspired Tse after Cambodian prison directors threatened her life. 'You must seek to find the Christ or the Buddha in each person,' the nun said. 'Then you must work with that Christ or Buddha.' "
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> **--E. W. Green**
> --In: Green, 2006.

On to China and Elsewhere

Karen became interested in China when she learned that China had outlawed police torture in 1996, and laws had been passed for the first time stating that defendants are to be assumed innocent until proven guilty, and have the right to a lawyer.

In 2001, a helpful professor at a Chinese university in Beijing was able to arrange a meeting for Karen with Gong Xiaobing, the national director of Legal Aid in China. At the last minute, Xiaobing tried to cancel the appointment; but persistence and charm won Karen a 15-minute meeting. She left with an arrangement for a dinner meeting, the outcome of which was a work agreement.

She promised as part of the deal to provide the Chinese government with 400 working computers. She had no money to pay for this. At that poin,t IBJ was basically a vision and an office in Geneva. She had gotten the air fare to make the visit to Beijing from a

generous friend. She learned what all people with great visions eventually do: to make changes requires money.

She tried fundraising, but it was difficult because people thought her vision of judicial reform in China was crazy, or at the least, too optimistic. It didn't help that even her friends and family wouldn't help at first. Then, she ran into Michael Dell (Dell computers) one day by chance, and she received a George Socos grant for $300,000. After that, it got easier. (Green, 2006)

As of 2006, IBJ had produced a practical "how to" manual for public defenders, conducted seminars, workshops, and tutoring sessions to tutor over 10,000 public defenders, organized discussion sessions to bring together and promote cooperation of police, defenders, prosecutors, and established two Defender Resource Centers to support legal aid providers.

They have replaced the banners in Chinese police stations that used to say "Confess — better treatment; Resist — harsher treatment" with posters that say, "If you are arrested, know your rights!" Posters are an important means of communication in China, so the IBJ team and collaborators produced and distributed nearly a million posters and brochures, in a variety of languages, to promote basic legal rights.

Currently, IBJ is working in China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and Burundi.

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Note: There are other videos about her, just search online for them.

Discussion or Essay Questions

When you talk or write, please try to use some of the new words you have learned in this reading. If you have noticed new grammatical structures, try to use them, too.

1. Why do you think Karen has been successful in what she is trying to do? What personal characteristics do you think lie behind her success? Explain what part of the reading you think proves your points.
2. Do you think human rights exist? Name some rights you think all humans have. Can your group or class make a list of the rights you all agree on, and another list of those you disagree about? (It's OK to disagree!) If you don't think rights exist, explain why.
3. Explain in detail what "Confess — better treatment; Resist — harsher treatment " means. Suppose you were a prisoner, and you were innocent. Would you confess? Why or why not?
4. Ask your own question. Ask a question related to this reading and answer it. (Note: answer has to require a discussion, not just to answer "yes" or "no.")

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